



Loventry Patmore

KITTY'S FATHER

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'THE ADMIRABLE LADY BIDDY FANE,' 'A SMUGGLER'S SECRET,'
'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.

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KITTY'S FATHER

CHAPTER I.

PROLOGUE.

Two miserable card-sharpers came at day-break to the brow of the hill overlooking the old town of Chester. Just past the church and opposite the Rectory was a gate opening into the glebe slopes ; there, by common accord, they halted, and, hanging over the gate, looked down in silence on the racecourse. It lay beyond the town, within a wide semicircular reach of the river. In that half-light they could just make out the

swings and roundabouts on the skirt of a gray patch of canvas tents and booths. There was no motion, no sound. Not a thread of smoke rose from the brown stretch of roofs below. The world seemed dead, and the leaden clouds, unbroken, hung over all like a pall.

The two men had been tramping all night—from the hour when they were turned out of the last beershop : they were dry, jaded, and surly. Neither had opened his lips to speak for an hour, both being too dejected even to curse the long dusty road. Now, at last, one of them spoke.

‘What are we a-stoppin’ here for?’

‘’Taint no use a-goin’ on, as I see. Shan’t find e’er a corfee aouse nor nuffin open for free hours yet.’

‘Well, we ain’t likely to find no corfee aouse open up here, are we?’ retorted the other, turning round and looking about him.

‘’Taint no treat a-goin’ down in that meader. It’ll be all amuck wiv the fog off the river. I’m for doin’ a doss in the church porch or someres where it’s a bit dry.’

‘’Enery,’ said the one who had been looking around, in a lowered tone, ‘that’s a bloomin’ fine aouse over there.’ He nodded toward the Rectory house, whose gables and upper windows rose beyond the high garden wall.

‘Parsonage or suffin.’

‘Enery’s mate, after another pause, spoke in a still lower tone, yet with a hopeful inflexion:

‘’Taint likely they’ve left no doors open where a bloke could sneak a drop to drink.’

‘What do you fink—a clergyman’s aouse and race time an’ all!’ He plucked a spike of grass and slowly chewed it, leaning against the gate with his elbow on the top bar, while the other, not dissuaded by his

reasoning, followed the hedge side for some distance, crossed the road, and, putting his hands on the garden wall, drew himself up and looked over.

'Enery chewed on in moody silence until his mate hailed him with a low sibilant call. He crossed the road gingerly and joined him, still munching the grass in sceptical despondency.

'Give us a bunnick up,' whispered the more energetic partner; 'strawberries is in, and there's a bed on 'em down there, which I'm goin' for.'

The other gave the required lift.

'Are you a-comin' along?' asked 'Enery from the top of the wall.

'Well, you don't fink I'm goin' to stop here a-chewin' grass while you're a-wolfin' strawberries in there, do you? Give us a pull.'

In a few minutes both were 'wolfing' the Rector's cherished fruit, and for half an hour

they wolfed in silence ; then one of them, seized with a misgiving, for the berries were mostly unripe, spoke :

‘ I don’t know how these is goin’ to agree with our in’ards. If we could on’y get a drop o’ sperrits to keep ’em from turnin’ of us up !’

‘ ’Tain’t more’n half-past free yet awhile ; shan’t get no sperrits afore six.’

‘ We might jest go and have a look at the doors, now we’re here.’

‘ Ain’t no harm in lookin’, is there ?’

‘ Come on. We can mike round by the bloomin’ s’rubbery.’

They got into the shrubbery, and followed the path between the evergreens on tip-toe until they found an open lawn before them, with the house beyond. They paused and looked. It was all right. The sombre house was as still as a tomb. Skirting the dark evergreens, they passed over the lawn and entered a similar alley to that which

they had left, glad to be again where they were safe from observation. They had no wish to try the front of the house ; their hopes lay in the direction of the kitchens and offices at the back, towards which the shrubbery trended. But they had not gone a dozen stealthy steps from the open lawn when they stopped suddenly, clutching at each other in alarm. They had both caught the sound of the click of a lock, which to their ears was ominously like the cocking of a gun. They waited a minute in breathless suspense, looking to the right and left in quick apprehension, for neither could say where the sound came from. Then they clutched at each other again, as the creaking of a hinge struck their ears. Without a doubt that came from the house across the lawn. What were they to do ? They had not the advantage of being professional burglars, but they stood a fair chance of suffering the dis-

advantage of such rascals if they were caught. To go back the way they had come, they must cross the lawn and expose themselves to discovery; they were at sea as to their whereabouts, and knew no other way of escape. To make a dash for it was out of the question. There was the high wall to be scaled, and neither could depend on the help of his friend at such a time. Yet they must do something, if only to assure themselves that they were not being noiselessly crept upon by the enemy. With this consciousness they slowly and stealthily retraced their steps towards the lawn, bending low and seeking to find an opening through the evergreens by which to reconnoitre. Presently they both got a glimpse of the house. It had a door in the middle, and a veranda running to the right and left. Under the veranda one of the French windows was open; in front of it the parson stood looking out over the lawn.

They could tell he was the parson by his long black coat, close waistcoat, and shaven face. He looked like a phantom in the gray light ; his face was a white patch—nothing more.

Had he heard them ? His presence there seemed to prove that he had. There might be a dog in the house whose fine sense had caught the rustle of their feet in the bed of strawberries ; the parson had dressed and come down. That he suspected something was evident ; for, as they watched, he stepped out on to the lawn, looking to the right and left ; then he stood still for some seconds in an attentive, listening attitude. Once more he came forward, and now the two unfortunate marauders felt it was high time to retreat. A dozen steps would bring the parson to the alley, and within arm's reach of them. They were peaceable rascals. To get into a row at the very beginning of the race week was the

worst luck that could befall them, short of being made prisoners and delivered up to the police. To avoid an encounter, they turned about, and in mortal dread crept back along the alley. Happily the alley was disused and overgrown, so that they reached the end of the path without making any sound to betray them. But they were not at ease then.

The path abutted upon a quadrangular yard that seemed used for farm purposes. An irregular building enclosed it on three sides—possibly they were sheds for cows or stables for horses. There was a roofed well in the middle; hard by was a heap of manure and a tumbrel with its shafts in the air. There seemed to be a gateway between two of the barn-like structures in front, but it was impossible to think of escaping that way. Barn doors were not in their line, and how they fastened and unfastened was a mystery they could not venture to solve.

The only other exit was a narrow door on one side of the yard ; but that clearly opened upon the domestic offices, and might probably lead them into a trap from which escape was more difficult than their present position. A door of one of the sheds close at hand stood open. They approached it and looked in. It was dark inside—beautifully dark ; a few rough tools near the door, and an earthy smell, encouraged the cockneys to believe that they might take refuge there without fear of being kicked by horses or tossed by bulls, and they crept in as far as they dared go in the dark. And here they waited with craned necks, watching the shrubbery, ready to draw back in an instant if the ghostly face of the parson suddenly appeared against the dark green of the laurels.

But he did not come. The slightest sound would have been caught by their strained ears ; the perfect stillness was un-

broken. Gradually unbending from their cramped position as their courage revived, they rose to their feet and held a whispered consultation.

‘He ain’t come frough the s’rubbery.’

‘Seems like he’s gone back agin.’

‘P’raps he’s gone to wake the servints.’

‘Or fetch a dawg—or a gun.’

‘Better clear out of this sharp. How about the door?’

‘We’ll have a look frough the bushes to see he ain’t hangin’ about afore we go messin’ along o’ doors what we don’t know nuffin about.’

‘Right y’are ; come on.’

They made their way back into the alley slowly, balancing first on one foot, then on the other, until they came to a part of the shrubbery where the evergreens were sparsely planted, and they dropped on their hands and knees to peer under the lower branches, where the growth was thinnest. They were

almost on a parallel with the façade of the house ; a flower border lay between them and the lawn on the other side of the ever-greens.

‘Can’t see nobody. Where’s the bloomin’ winder?’ whispered one.

‘Tuvver side of the door. We must go further round afore——’

He stopped abruptly, for at that moment both heard the rustle of a foot in the crisp grass of the lawn, and a minute afterwards the parson himself passed before them. He was so close to them that they could not see more than the skirt of his frock-coat and his legs. But the strange thing was that his knees were bent, and he planted one foot firmly before lifting the other, taking short, quick paces, as though he carried a heavy burden. They could not make it out. It was not with such a gait that he would skirt the lawn if he were on the look-out for depredators ! Yet it

seemed as if he were simply making the tour of the lawn.

Suddenly a brusque movement of the evergreens and the scrunch of a heavy foot on the path indicated that the parson had quitted the lawn and entered the alley in the shrubbery. The two sharpers rose swiftly to their feet and as rapidly as caution permitted retraced their steps to the yard, for it was clear that the parson was coming down the path. At each moment they heard the quick, sharp crunch of his heavy step; the rustling of the foliage was continual, as though the way was too narrow for his passage. The rascals got back to the shed breathless with haste and fear, and crouched down in the obscurity beyond the half-closed door, looking intently at the opening in the shrubbery for the further development of the mystery. Nearer and nearer the heavy footstep came; the brushing of the evergreens grew louder,

and at length the parson came in sight, bent low and staggering under the load painfully poised upon his shoulder. What was the load he bore? A man—another parson, seemingly, by his dress—an old man with thin, silvery hair that shone in the gray light. And he was dead, for his limbs hung supine and his head swayed from side to side as his bearer staggered on.

The bearer's strength had almost given out. He made for the well in the middle of the yard with slow, short, struggling steps. The mouth of the well was surrounded by a brick wall rising three or four feet from the ground. Arrived at the edge, the parson steadied his legs and attempted to throw his burden on the wall; but his strength was not equal to the effort, and the body, sliding from his shoulder, fell to the earth, the upper part huddled up against the brickwork, the white head drooping forward in an attitude terribly

grotesque. The living parson straightened himself up and looked round him with the same listening attention the men had observed when they first saw him on the lawn. He stood thus in the dead stillness for fully two minutes, then, drawing a handkerchief from the tail pocket of his frock-coat, he slowly wiped the sweat from his livid face. He was a man of medium height, with light hair, and about forty—so much the men in the shed could make out by furtive glimpses, and in that faint light, but little more with certainty.

When he had wiped his face he slowly replaced the handkerchief in his pocket, looking down at the dead man by his feet. Then he bent down, and, clasping the body in his arms, endeavoured to raise it up on the edge of the well; but he could not lift it high enough, and after a struggle he let it slip from his arms, the body this time falling at full length, and the white old head

striking the cobble pavement with a dull thud. The parson looked about him, and, catching sight of the bucket hanging over the well by a chain running through a pulley in the cross-beam above, went to the windlass and slowly unwound it. Evidently the well was in disuse, for despite his slow and cautious movement the windlass and pulley squeaked and the rusted chain grated harshly as it descended. When a certain length was unwound he drew up the bucket from the well, unhooked it from the chain, and set it down softly. Then, taking the disengaged hook, he passed it under the dead man's head, drew the chain tight round his throat, and slipped the hook over a link. After pausing once more to look around and listen, he went slowly to the windlass and began steadily to wind it up. The winch squeaked, the pulley grated; but the chain held, tightening upon the dead man's throat and gradually dragging him up

from the ground. Higher and higher it rose, that ghastly freight, the body hanging at an angle from the wall, the neck stretching under the weight and tension, as if the body must break away from the head. The fear of that seemed to impress the parson at the winch, for, looking at it fixedly, he turned slower and more slow, until at length, the bulk having risen above the parapet, the long thin legs slipped over and fell within the mouth of the well. The parson stopped, looking up at the body, as, released from the strain, it turned slowly round like a man hanging from a gallows. The two rascals in the shed, looking on at this scene with a horrid interest which no event in their criminal lives had ever so aroused, fancied that they saw a grin in the parson's face as he regarded his brother Churchman thus hanging.

Then he unwound the winch, and the body slowly dropped out of sight. When the

chain hung loose he left the windlass, bent over the wall, shaking the chain until the hook was disengaged, and then wound it up to its original position. The ratchet fastened, he hung the bucket up as he found it, and with his chin in his hand, his shoulders bent, and walking on his toes, he quietly crossed the yard and disappeared amongst the evergreens.

The two sharpers waited, breathing softly, still silent, with a nameless fear, until a click, audible to them even at that distance, told that the parson had re-entered the house and shut the window. Then they whispered :

‘ My Gawd ! if that was one of us ! ’

‘ What did we ought to do ? ’

‘ Git out er this like a shot, and say nuffin to nobody. A bloke like that could swear our lives away. Who’d believe two free-card players if we told the truf and that cussed sleek vermin said he knowed nuffin about the job ? ’

‘ Right you are. It’ll be a lifer for us if we’re found here. We’ll get out by that ere gate, and down to the racecourse at a rush !’

‘ If I aint all of a sweat ! I shall dream of that well and the pore old bloke a-swingin’ there.’

CHAPTER II.

KITTY'S FATHER.

KITTY had gone into the theatre, and I, standing by the stage-door, was lighting my pipe, for there was yet a quarter of an hour before the orchestra was called, when a man leaning against the wall at a little distance approached me, and said in a tone of familiarity : ‘ After you, Mr. Holderness.’

A gust of wind blew out the lighted vesta as I offered it. I handed him the box. He was a middle-aged man of medium height, dressed in a long ulster, with a red handkerchief round his throat. He took off his bowler to shelter the match he struck.

The flickering light from the lamp over the stage-door fell on his head, and I saw that his closely-cropped hair was quite white, and that his face and lips were clean-shaven. He raised his hand with the light in it to his pipe. The light, dancing after each pull, shone on his hollow cheeks and his high cheek-bones, his grizzled eyebrows, the crow's-feet in the angles of his eyes, his pinched nostrils and his long upper lip; but I couldn't make out who he was. He seemed conscious of my perplexity, for, still holding the light before his face, he turned his eyes towards me, amusement puckering the crow's-feet, and said, between a couple of whiffs:

‘ You don't recognise me, I see ? ’

‘ No,’ said I, ‘ but that's not surprising—there's such a lot of you about the place. Everyone knows the leader of the band by sight, but I only know my band and half a dozen of the mummers.’

‘ Ah, you set me down for a mummer.’
He threw away the match and replaced his hat. ‘ Why ?’

‘ Because you’ve got a long upper lip, your face is shaved, and your hair’s close-cropped.’

He gave a low chuckle, and replied :

‘ Mummers are not the only people who have to wear their hair short.’

I recognised him in that instant. The chuckle did it—just as a chance note will return to one’s memory a long-forgotten air.

‘ Good God !’ I exclaimed in astonishment and with bated breath. ‘ Is it you, Bob ?’

He nodded in silence, and, passing his arm under mine, led me away from the stage-door. We paced slowly up to the end of the side street, turned and paced back without a word. I knew what he meant by saying that actors were not the only men who had to keep their hair clipped close, and understood now why I had heard nothing of him for so many years—he had

been in a convict prison ; and as I thought of the reckless self-abandonment which had brought a decent man to this degradation, a feeling of resentment and anger chilled and silenced me.

‘ You’re not very chatty,’ he said, after a sigh, as if shaking off oppressive memories, ‘ considering it’s fifteen years since we met.’

‘ I thought you were dead.’

‘ And you don’t seem well pleased to find that I’m not. Well, I suppose I ought to have killed myself. It’s the quickest way of forgetting. Drink and dissipation don’t do it. Time hardly does it. The short cut’s the best. I ought to have died.’

‘ Nonsense, Bob ! A man ought to live down his troubles, and do his duty, and that’s what you ought to have done. It would have been better for you and others.’

He tossed his head with a contemptuous exclamation, and said, nodding towards a

wretched old cab-horse drawn up before the corner beershop :

‘ You might as well tell that poor old hack that if he’d been born with a little more stuff and go in him he’d have made the fortune of his owner, and been better cared for than many a Christian.’

I could have continued the argument by showing him that he had strength and go in him, and that for the seven years that I had known him previous to the awful accident in which my poor sister Madge was killed, he had resisted all those temptations to which a genial, lively, and good-looking young fellow in the profession is especially subjected — never giving cause for the slightest reproach ; but the memory of him at that time, of the perfect happiness in which he lived with his wife, and of the fearful blow which unmanned him and for a time absolutely shook his reason, softened my heart and silenced my tongue. It was

too terrible, too pathetic, to talk about, even at this long distance of time.

‘We won’t continue the subject, Bob,’ said I, pressing his arm with mine.

‘You may be sure I didn’t come round to be blown up,’ said he.

‘No. I suppose you want a little assistance.’

‘Assistance? No, I didn’t come round for that, neither.’

‘I thought just coming out——’ I suggested, with some hesitation in approaching a delicate matter.

He gave another quiet chuckle—that sign of a sense of humour which had helped me more than anything else to identify him, and said he had been out some time.

‘And what are you doing now for a living?’ I asked.

‘Oh, horses—anything that comes to hand,’ he answered evasively. ‘But that isn’t what I want to talk to you about. I’ve

come to call *you* to account. *You're* not so strong as you might be, Mr. Holderness.'

'Why, what have I done?' I asked in astonishment, finding the tables thus turned upon me.

'You promised me that Kitty should never go on the stage.'

'That's true. But she was only six then, and I could do what I liked with her; now she's twenty-one and has a will of her own.'

'How long has she been on the boards?'

'Four years. She would go on. She's a born actress.' As my brother-in-law made no reply, I felt it necessary to continue. 'The stage isn't what it was fifteen years ago, Bob. We've got ladies of title on the boards, and they're not above any business they can get. If you look at last week's *Illustrated* you'll see a picture of the Honourable Misses Thingummy doing a skirt dance in a burlesque, and if you go in

the show to-night, you'll find Kitty's skirts quite as long as theirs, and her business perfectly modest.'

'That's all right; I've seen her every night this week from the gallery.'

Surprise at this unexpected announcement silenced me for a minute; then I said:

'She was bound to do something for a living. I'm not getting younger, and salaries on my side of the footlights haven't gone up like those on the other. Since the old management at Liverpool broke up, I've had to put up with what I could get—provincials, tours, and that sort of thing, so my means are short. Well, I didn't like to send Kitty out as a governess, and she hated the idea. It's a bad thing to force young people into occupations they dislike, and she would have been quite beyond control unless I could have got a fixed engagement; whereas, now, you see, she's

never out of my sight, though I will say this for the dear girl, she's never given me reason to believe that she needs looking after, for a more open, honest, affectionate soul never lived. It's Madge living again in her daughter, and——'

I stoppe^d, for a convulsive twitch of the man's fingers on my arm warned me that he could not think calmly even now of the lost wife, as I of the dead sister.

'Yes, yes, yes—I've got eyes,' he said abruptly, and breaking away from the line of thought, he asked, 'Has she any sweetheart?'

'She's had sweethearts since she was in short frocks—dozens. Everyone falls in love with her.'

'Yes; but has she fallen in love with anyone?' he asked sternly.

'Not seriously.'

'So much the worse,' he said gloomily; and then in a still harder tone he asked:

‘That fellow in the O.P. omnibus box every night?’

‘Oh, that’s Lord Strathsay,’ I replied, scratching my cheek uneasily.

‘I know, d—— him! Why is he there every night?’

‘It isn’t likely the management would refuse to let the box, is it, Bob?’

‘Does he go behind?’

‘He did, Bob. He spoke to Kitty. What he said I don’t know, but she told the stag-mag. that if ever he came behind again she’d quit the stage the same minute and break her engagement, whatever it cost her.’ Bob chuckled, and I went on: ‘There’s nothing to fear; Kitty shows me every letter he sends, and to-night the engagement ends.’

‘You open at Nottingham on Monday?’

‘Yes, but it isn’t likely this fool will follow us.’

‘That depends. If he were a young

fellow he might give up the chase ; but these middle-aged blackguards, when they take to hunting down a girl—you know what they are as well as I do. They get bets on, and there's no knowing how their devilry will end. However, I'll look after that. *He won't go to Nottingham !*

At that moment the call-boy came to the stage-door, and, seeing me, called out :

‘ The orchestra's rung, Mr. Holderness.’

‘ One minute,’ said Bob, holding my hand as I offered to say good-night. ‘ There are two things I want to say. If Kitty thinks I'm dead, don't undeceive her. That's one. The next is, I should like to see her married and off the boards. If a decent fellow comes along, and the only impediment is money, just write to me, and I may be able to get over that difficulty. This address will find me.’

Looking at the envelope he put in my hand, I read : ‘ John Evans, Deacon's Read-

ing Rooms, Leadenhall Street.' John Evans was his present alias.

There was no time to ask for explanation, but all through the overture I kept saying to myself: 'How on earth is he going to prevent Lord Strathsay following us to Nottingham, and how can a man just out of prison make enough money to provide for Kitty if necessary?' The only answer I could find to these questions was: 'By violence and robbery.'

As soon as the curtain rose on the dark scene of the pantomime opening, I turned my head and glanced up at the gallery. In the prompt side corner I saw Bob, his elbows over the iron rail, his chin in his hands. That allayed my apprehension for the moment; nevertheless, his presence there did not prevent the fulfilment of my conclusion that he intended by violence to stop Lord Strathsay's pursuit of Kitty.

About half-way through the opening his

lordship, with a couple of friends, came into the O.P. omnibus box, all in correct evening dress. Lord Strathsay seated himself in the front and nodded to Kitty, who at that moment happened to be facing him, with an air of insolent assurance that made my blood boil. Kitty went on with her business, taking no more notice of him than of anyone else in the house. Her performance ended with the scene before the transformation, but Lord Strathsay remained in his box as usual, for after changing her dress my niece invariably took a seat in the manager's box on the prompt side to wait for me. She came down that night just at the beginning of the second scene of the harlequinade, as we were playing the lilt for harlequin and columbine. The lilt ended, and the croaking voice of the pantaloon was heard in the wings calling: 'Where are you, Joey; where are you?' to which the clown from the other wing replied: 'Here we are, old

man. Oh, sich a bit of fun! See what I've got;' and he staggered on from the prompt side with a hod of bricks on his shoulder as the pantaloon hobbled on from the O.P. side. Now, this was quite a new piece of business on the part of the pair, who usually have the management of the harlequinade, and I watched its development with curiosity, for it is rare that any fresh trick is introduced on the last night of a pantomime.

'Why, what have you got there?' squeaked the pantaloon, resting on his crutch and looking across.

'I'll show you, old man; stay where you are,' replied the clown, blinking and grinning at the audience as he set down the hod and balanced a brick in his hand.

These properties are the size and shape of ordinary bricks, made of stout canvas and stuffed tight with sawdust, and as a missile

are hardly less formidable than blocks of solid wood.

‘ You ain’t a-goin’ to chuck them at your p’or old father, are you, Joey ?’ said the pantaloon, trembling.

‘ You’ll see what I’m going to do with ’em,’ replied Joey, blinking and grinning at the expectant audience again, as he weighed the brick and sidled towards the pantaloon. The pantaloon backed along the proscenium, and crouched against the pilaster beside the O.P. omnibus. Just beyond him was Lord Strathsay, with his long nose and long moustache, one elbow resting on the edge of the box, and his face turned towards Kitty in the box opposite. He seemed quite unconscious of what was going on upon the stage in the insolent persistency with which he stared at my niece. Suddenly the clown turned and launched the brick with all his force. It missed the pantaloon, but struck Lord Strathsay full in the face. His lord-

ship staggered, and as he rose, covering his face with his hands, I saw the blood dropping in thick gout upon his white shirt-front.

There was a commotion in the house, and the stage-manager thought it advisable to ring down the curtain at once.

Leaving the orchestra to join Kitty, I heard all sorts of rumours as I crossed the stage. Some said that his lordship's nose was crushed flat with his face, others that the glass of his pince-nez had been broken and driven into his eyes; some said it was an accident, others whispered that it had been done intentionally. There was a group at the foot of the dressing-room stairs, where the clown had stopped on the third step and was in high altercation with the stage-manager below. Catching sight of me, he called :

‘Here, Mr. Holderness, have you ever said a word to me about Lord Strathsay

pestering your niece? Mr. Johnson here makes out I smashed him on purpose, and that you paid me to do it.'

'That is not true,' said I.

But I knew who had paid him to smash his lordship—it was Kitty's father.

CHAPTER III.

KITTY.

WE opened at Nottingham with Henry J. Byron's admirable burlesque 'The Miller and his Men,' which we had rehearsed at Sheffield during the run of the pantomime, Arthur Cooper's burlesque company having formed the nucleus of the show there.

As I seated myself in the orchestra I looked round the theatre with some anxiety; for though I heard that Lord Strathsay was seriously injured, I feared that, from a feeling of revenge, he might follow us up, despite his disfigurement, for he had rather more reason than others to

believe that I had instigated Joe Smith to 'smash' him.

I dreaded as much, if not more, to see Kitty's father, Robert Yorke. The possibility that he might avow his relationship and take her under his own protection had kept me awake at night and troubled me all day. And there was nothing improbable in the possibility, for despite his expressed desire that she should be kept in darkness as to his existence, the feeling which had led him to watch her night after night for a week might grow, and with the belief that she would restore the happiness he had lost by the death of her mother, his generous resolution might be abandoned. And what a calamity that would be for poor Kitty, what a grievous shock to her pride, what a cloud it must cast over her life! Everyone in the profession who had known him previous to the overwhelming misfortune which made him quit the stage at once and

for ever spoke of 'poor Bob' with enthusiastic admiration and kindness. Very few besides myself knew of the evil courses to which he took after that event, and out of love for Bob and consideration for Kitty the blemishes upon his character were never alluded to. It was supposed that he had gone to sea and been lost. There were dozens of stories current in evidence of 'poor Bob's' generosity, tender feeling, and exuberant humour, and Kitty stored them all in her memory, looking back upon her lost father as a faultless man, and glorifying him with all the attributes that entered her ardent imagination. What must she suffer now to find her father an ex-convict and living by means which I had only too much reason to suspect he dared not himself acknowledge.

So first I ran my eye carefully round the gallery, and breathed more freely, finding that he was not there; then I glanced at the boxes

and stalls ; and my satisfaction was completed by seeing that Lord Strathsay was not in the house either. And as far as this nobleman is concerned I may here say that we have never seen anything of him from that day to this. One lesson of the kind he received is enough.

Business was bad at Nottingham, and at Lincoln, where we had hoped to do better, it was even worse. Some said it was too soon after the pantomime season for a burlesque to do well : others that 'The Müller and his Men' was not up to date, though we had cut out all the old songs and substituted topical and music-hall verses of the trashiest and most vulgar description : anyhow, there was the fact, and the public did not 'hitch on,' as we say. Cooper, a most genial and pleasant young fellow when things were hopeful, was gloomy and morose, and all of us were more or less discontented and quarrelsome. For it was a

pretty open secret that Cooper had not much money to lose, and we foresaw that one fine treasury day our salaries would not be forthcoming. And it was bad enough to play to empty houses. The first night at Sheffield we got insulting remarks from the roughs in the gallery. I think that these, in conjunction with the miserable returns from the box-office, decided Cooper to try something else. After the show he took me into his room and said :

‘ You’re a bit of a literary swell, Holder-ness, and you’ve had sufficient experience to know what will fetch the B.P. I wish you’d run through half a dozen of these scrips, and see if there’s anything likely to suit us.’ He opened his dress-basket, and showed me a lot of MSS. in the corner, adding, ‘ I’m hanged if I know what they want.’

‘ Certainly,’ I replied. ‘ Nothing will give me greater pleasure.’

‘Take three to begin with—middle-sized ones. The little uns are farces, and the Lord only knows what the big ones are.’

Kitty was delighted when she heard of the task I had undertaken. I never knew a more insatiable reader; she devoured all that came before her in the shape of literature, but a new play was the feast of feasts.

‘We will read *one* after supper,’ she suggested, pressing my arm as we trotted home to our lodgings.

I remonstrated, but as usual yielded to her cajolery. She opened all three before we had finished supper. One was a drama, another a farcical comedy, and the third a ‘variety entertainment.’ It seemed to me that the latter would be more likely to suit us, but Kitty declared for the comedy.

‘I wonder you didn’t select the drama, Kit,’ said I. ‘You low comedians always believe that you are born for tragedy.’

She looked at me with her earnest expression—for at times she could be wonderfully serious, and said :

‘And is it not a good thing, uncle, to believe that we are capable of better things than we do ! I should be sorry to think I could play nothing higher than burlesque.’

‘So should I, my dear,’ said I, taking her soft white hand and raising her fingers to my lips.

She smiled, and pressed my hand to show that she was convinced of my sympathy, and then, pushing back the plate, attacked the comedy, while I fetched my pipe.

‘“The Blue-stockings,”’ she read ; ‘that’s a good title, isn’t it ? “By John Vernon Sherridan,” and that’s a good name—John Vernon.’

‘If it had been Richard Brinsley——’

‘Here’s his address—Pump Court, Temple,’ she continued, taking no notice of

my objection. 'He must be a nice fellow, the author.'

'Why?'

'I never knew a Jack that wasn't nice.'

'How about Jack Sheppard?' I asked, sitting down with my pipe.

But she was already engrossed in the first page of the comedy, and it was no trivial thing that could divert her thoughts from it.

I, less eager to begin the work of selection, was well content to smoke in silence, watching her rapt face bent over the MS., the light of the lamp gilding her soft dark hair and defining her delicate profile with a bright line. Looking at her, I felt that desire to be an artist which nearly all of us experience in the presence of some beautiful combination of form and colour. 'If I could paint Kitty as she is,' I said to myself, 'it would be the prettiest picture in the world.' As a poor alterna-

tive I fancied I might describe her in my diary for my future delight, and so set myself to decide what I could say about her features ; but my pipe was smoked out before I could find any suitable terms to represent her features and their charm as I saw them ; only whilst I was making this endeavour, an air from 'Don Giovanni' kept running in my head, and that seemed to express what I felt better than anything. And I feel now that it would be as useless to attempt to describe 'Vedrai carino' to one who had not heard Mozart's opera as to try to convey an idea of Kitty's face to those who have never seen her.

I laid aside my pipe and opened the 'variety entertainment' with the determination to read it through ; but despite myself I fell into a doze over the second page. A rippling laugh made me open my eyes at once ; Kitty had her elbows planted on each side of the MS. and her face in her hands ;

her shoulders were shaking with merriment. I closed my eyes, and did not open them until I again heard Kitty's voice. She had finished the play—it was lovely; so full of fun, so clever!

‘Oh, you must read just this one scene,’ she said.

‘My dear,’ said I, ‘I can scarcely see to wind up my watch. Nearly two! Good gracious!’

She offered to read it to me, but I stoutly declined to hear a word of it till the next morning. And so we parted for the night.

The next morning we were in the poky little sitting-room, I stringing my fiddle and Kitty making a beef-steak pudding—no one in the world could make such beef-steak puddings as hers—when Arthur Cooper dropped in. Kitty had an apron with a bib pinned on her print frock; her sleeves were rolled up. There was flour on her arms up

to her elbow, and on her fingers and the tip of her pretty little nose. She was rolling the paste on the board before her. On one side were a basin and a jug, a salt-cellar and a pepper-pot; on the other a flour-dredger and a plate of steak. Newspapers were spread on the floor to protect the carpet, the breakfast-things were on the chiffonier, my fiddle-case was on one chair, the MSS. on another, and altogether we were in a fine muddle. But Kitty was not a bit put out by this unexpected visit, for she had not an atom of false pride. In professional lodgings you have to do as you can; and, then, we had worked with Cooper so long that we felt almost as if we were of one family.

‘How do, Kitty?’ said he jocosely. ‘Creating a new *rôle*.’ with a nod at the paste.

‘Yes, sir,’ she replied with a bob; ‘and if you will stay to dinner I hope you may have every reason to be satisfied with my

performance.' She was just as smart as he at a joke.

'Well, Holderness,' said Cooper, throwing himself on the horsehair couch after carefully sliding Kitty's sealskin jacket off on to the floor, 'I came round to tell you that you needn't bother to read those scrips.'

Kitty stopped rolling her paste, with something like dismay in her face.

'What's happened?' I asked.

'Alice came home to supper with us last night.'

Kitty's brows knitted in anger, and she banged the dough viciously. 'Alice was Cooper's sister—an overbearing, impudent little minx, the most showy and exacting member of the company. Cooper feared her, and we all hated her.

'She and the wife had a row after supper—I believe Alice came home on purpose to be disagreeable. And when I hinted that

we were going to change the bill she said at once she should jack it up and look out for another engagement. And that's what we must all do. She sees it's going to be a bad season, and means to scuttle out of the ship before it sinks—a little rat! You know, Holderness, I can't afford to drop my little bit of money, and I know very well we can't go on like this. I dropped coin last week, and this'll be worse. So I thought I would let you know at once, so that you might keep your eye open for anything that's going.'

'Kitty's read one of the scrips,' said I: '“The Blue-stockings,” a farcical comedy. She says it's excellent.'

'Splendid!' said Kitty. 'Oh, it would be a pity to lose that—and all for *Miss Cooper*,' with disdainful emphasis on that lady's name and another bang at the paste.

'No, it's no go. Look what it would land me into to produce a new play.'

‘No expense at all,’ Kitty insisted. ‘No properties to carry about, stock scenery, only six characters, and no chorus girls.’

She knew that Cooper constantly grudged the expense of the four girls who served as chorus.

‘How about the author’s fees—who is it by?’

‘Mr. Sherridan. He does not write author of anything, and his address is the Temple, so he’s a gentleman, and would not want a lot of money like a regular author.’

Cooper scratched his head in doubtful silence, and then asked me if I had read it.

‘No; Kitty was going to read it to me when she had made her pudding.’

‘Just wait till I’ve thrown in my steak,’ said Kitty, working away vigorously. ‘I’ll read it, and you will see if it is a play to be thrown away just because one person thinks herself too good for us.’

‘The wife can’t take a leading part, and

if Alice goes who have we got to fill her place ?’

‘ Well, Mr. Cooper,’ retorted Kitty, drawing herself up to her full height and flourishing her fine dark eyelashes as she swept back a stray curl with the back of her wrist, ‘ I think I am entitled to some consideration, though I haven’t the art of making myself disagreeable. I know I could play the part of “ Our Liz ” in that play better than your sister could ; and there’s a splendid part for you—a retired officer with a game leg—“ General Titup.” ’

‘ N-o,’ drawled Cooper, shaking his head in unsatisfactory reflection ; ‘ a new play, you know, is like that pudding, Kitty—there’s no knowing how it’ll turn out.’

‘ But I know it will turn out well, and so would anyone else with the common-sense to see that it’s well made.’

She put the pudding in the saucepan, washed her hands, and, with her sleeves still

tucked up, sat down and read the play to us. And she read it with such vivacity, such admirable dramatic expression—impersonating each character by some trick of voice and manner, and making every point tell—and with such irresistible drollery, that both Cooper and I were fairly carried away. But Kitty would allow him no time for reflection or further influence from his family. The pudding was cooked by the time the play was read, and she insisted on his staying to see ‘how it turned out.’ He dined with us; the pudding was excellent, and he, being as superstitious as the rest of professional people, took it as an augury promising well for the success of the play. He wrote that afternoon to the author, and a few days after told us that Mr. Sherridan would meet us at Liverpool, when the new comedy would be put up for rehearsal.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. SHERRIDAN.

WE played the burlesque, again to a bad house, at Liverpool on Monday, and the company was called for eleven the next morning to hear the new play read. Kitty and I reached the theatre as the clock was striking eleven, found the T light up on the proscenium, a table and chair underneath, and half a dozen chairs arranged in a semi-circle at a little distance. All the ladies were there dressed in their very best, even the four chorus girls who had been exempted from the call, for they knew that authors are to be won by good looks and bright

glances into making a small part for a favourite. The author generally has a very pleasant time of it at the beginning, for everyone is anxious to flatter and conciliate him with a view to getting a part written up, or a few lines inserted here and there. It is after the first alterations in the text, and when the rehearsals begin in real earnest, that his troubles come. So we all looked at our best. Mrs. Cooper was very handsome in a new hat and furs ; Alice Cooper, who had agreed to reconsider her decision to quit us until she had heard what the comedy was like, looked very showy and attractive in an old-gold plush dress and a new mantle ; the chorus girls had smartened themselves up to the best of their ability ; and Kitty had gone to the expense of putting a Medici collar on her sealskin jacket, and furnishing herself with new boots and gloves. Of all the ladies she was the least showy, but to my mind the most ladylike.

‘Oh, if I were only two inches taller!’ she whispered to me, with a glance at Alice Cooper.

That was Kitty’s constant regret, though she was quite up to the medium height, and would have been out of proportion with her small head and hands if she had been but an inch taller. I had explained this to her again and again, but it did not prevent her buying the highest heeled boots that were to be had.

Presently, Arthur Cooper, in a light overcoat thrown open to display his frock-coat, with a flower in his buttonhole, his best silk hat, and a new pair of tan gloves, came briskly from the wings with the author. All eyes were turned on Mr. Sherridan, who had not yet been seen by any of us, and I think we were all pleased with the look of him—certainly I was. He was a fine, tall, athletic young man, of about eight-and-twenty or thirty, broad-shouldered and deep-

chested, well set up, and he carried himself like a gentleman ; he was easy without being careless, confident without being self-assertive. No one could doubt that he was a man of good blood and good breeding. He was fair with a light moustache ; his features were strong and well cut ; his frank and fearless expression was tempered by the play of a pair of soft gray eyes. When he took off his hat to us we could see that he had a fine broad white forehead, and shining hair, with a ripple in it. He was dressed in a morning suit of light tweed.

Cooper introduced him to his wife and sister, who both gave their hands, and then to the rest of us in a general way. I felt a little sore because he did not distinguish Kitty from the others, seeing that but for her the author would not have been there at all, and I believe Kitty was disappointed and hurt also. Mr. Sherridan turned to Mrs. Cooper and Alice, while the manager went

up to his room for the scrip, and it was clear that Miss Cooper was practising all her arts on the handsome young author, glancing sidelong, biting her under lip, smiling with a blinking of her eyelids, shrugging her shoulders together, and all the old tricks she employed night after night to 'fetch' the house. I did my best to talk cheerfully to Kitty, and stayed by her side until Cooper returned with the scrip and invited the company to sit down ; then I left her and joined the chorus girls, who had found a seat near the wing.

Cooper sat down on the right of the author, by the table, and then Mr. Sherridan, with a flush of excitement on his face, opened his MS. and began. He read it well, in a clear, ringing voice and with proper emphasis ; but, Lord ! how tame it seemed at this second reading, without the mimicry and sparkling humour which Kitty had put into it ! However, we all looked as

if we enjoyed it very much, especially the chorus girls and Miss Cooper, who could scarcely contain herself in some of the situations. These signs of appreciation encouraged Mr. Sherridan, and it was only natural that when he looked up his eyes should meet Miss Cooper's, who sat exactly opposite to him, and was loud in her approval. The only one who kept a really serious countenance was the poor manager, and he, having unbuttoned his frock-coat, sat back in his chair with his legs stretched out and his hands plunged into the depths of his pockets as if he were holding on to his shillings that threatened to slip away. Once he looked at me with his brow creased, as if he were asking himself what the devil he had seen in the play to accept it. During the first act he made one or two objections ; but I could see, by the settled expression of melancholy resignation in his face during the second, that he had abandoned himself to

despair, and in the third his eyes wandered apathetically round the empty house, as if he never hoped to see a full one again.

When the reading was ended the company rose and drew near the table. Then Cooper formally asked his sister if she would accept the part of 'Our Liz,' with a full determination, I believe, if she refused, to make the refusal a pretext for postponing the production of the play indefinitely. But she accepted at once, and emphatically, so he had no choice but to give out the other parts and call the first rehearsal for the Monday following, by which time the parts would be written out and distributed. The smallest part in the comedy fell to Kitty; and we walked home in secret dejection, whilst trying to make the best of it. There were but three women in the play, and it was only reasonable that Cooper should give the second best to his wife. As we were sitting down to dinner in our sitting-room,

we saw Cooper and his wife pass, and behind them Mr. Sherridan and Alice Cooper, who was practising what we called her 'Mrs. Kendall's smile' upon him. We said nothing, Kitty and I. We felt ourselves to be in very low water then.

But after the ebb the flow sets in. Mr. Sherridan came to the theatre in the evening to judge the strength of the company by their performance in the burlesque. He sat in a stage-box, so I got a glance at him now and then. Except her remarkably fine legs, Alice Cooper had very little to show him that he had not already seen. Her art was all superficial, and her success was mainly due to her audacity and those smiles and leers and tricks of manner which she had practised on him from the beginning. But Kitty evidently surprised him by her reserved power and quick humour. He watched her keenly and with the interest of a man who has the ability to recognise un-

developed talent in a young artist. After the show, as I was waiting on the stage for Kitty to come down from the dressing-room, he came up and introduced himself to me.

‘I have been watching Miss Yorke’s performance with very great pleasure. It encourages me to hope for the success of my own play,’ he said, as if the other performers had excited less agreeable anticipations. ‘I only regret that the part gives so little scope for her talent.’

‘I’m sure she will do her best to make the part a good one,’ said I.

At that moment Kitty came down, looking, as she always did, like a thoroughbred little lady.

‘Miss Yorke,’ he said, offering his hand, ‘I want to express my feeling of obligation to you. I have found since this morning that I am richer than I was, by a friend.’

‘How?’ asked Kitty, giving her hand,

and blushing with surprise and satisfaction.

‘Mr. Cooper has spoken to me very frankly about my comedy, and I learn that if it had not been for you my play would never have been accepted by him.’

‘Did he acknowledge the influence of a beef-steak pudding?’ Kitty asked.

‘A beef-steak pudding,’ he repeated with a look of perplexity and in a tone as if he doubted his hearing.

Kitty laughed, and told him how Cooper, still hesitating about the play, had likened its fate to the pudding she was making, and how she had made him stay to see that the pudding turned out well in order to bind him by his own argument. ‘The reading only prepared his mind for change; it was the pudding that decided him,’ she said in conclusion.

He laughed heartily at the story, and it at once put us on friendly terms; but I

observed that in the few sentences that followed there was no abridgment of the tone of respect in which he had first addressed her. No ordinary girl would have told that story. Certainly Alice Cooper would never have acknowledged to a gentleman that she made puddings. But I believe Mr. Sherridan admired Kitty the more for it, and that this incident gave him the keynote to her character — a character as honest and free from vulgarity as his own.

Our friendship ripened speedily, and while we were at Manchester, where the new play was put in rehearsal, an incident occurred which drew us still closer together. After the first rehearsal or two, which were devoted principally to setting the tableaux, and arranging the business details of the piece, and in which no one was expected to show much histrionic ability, it became evident that Alice Cooper was totally in-

capable of playing in her part. It was her first attempt at comedy, and a miserable failure at that. She had no inventive conception, and was too conceited to accept suggestions. Under correction she grew perverse and sulky, playing with stubborn persistency in the detestable flippant style of burlesque when the whole action of the play depended on serious treatment. She upset everyone ; and the play, instead of improving, grew worse by repetition—the plot growing so incongruous, and the situations so weak and vapid, that I myself doubted whether our judgment had not been betrayed by Kitty's vivacious reading. Cooper seemed to have no doubt on that point, and, regarding us as the authors of his coming ruin—for the thing looked utterly hopeless—could scarcely give us a civil word, and treated us at times with looks of thunder. As for the unlucky author, who had undertaken to rehearse his

production, he was goaded to despair by the impossibility of driving his ideas into the head of Miss Cooper. It was at the fifth rehearsal that Cooper was roused from his state of despondent lethargy and became furious.

‘That won’t do,’ he exclaimed, coming to the author’s assistance. ‘We’ll have that scene all over again. Now, Miss Cooper, you come in by the door; I am sitting here.’

Miss Cooper flounced out and entered once more.

‘Not like that,’ cried her brother. ‘Mr. Sherridan’s been trying this last half-hour to make you understand that you’re awfully put out to find me here, and you come in with a grin as if I were a dozen miles away. All over again.’

Miss Cooper shrugged her shoulders, and repeated the entrance with precisely the same air of jaunty indifference.

‘Holy Moses!’ shouted Cooper in exasperation, ‘we can’t clown the thing all through. It ain’t a pantomime.’ Then, turning to Kitty, he said: ‘Miss Yorke, will you be good enough to show Miss Cooper how you read this scene?’

‘Oh, if Miss Yorke can play the part better than me, she’d better do the lot,’ said Miss Cooper.

‘If the part don’t suit you, you’d better throw it up,’ retorted the manager. Whereupon Miss Cooper with a scornful sniff flung her already dog-eared part on the table and walked off the stage.

We knew she would come back in half an hour to take up her part again. Mr. Cooper, now brought to the last extremity, determined that she should not have the chance, and at once offered the part to Kitty. She accepted immediately—eager to pull the piece through if it were possible.

‘Who’s to read your part—that’s the question?’ said Cooper.

‘On that point I think we may safely trust to Miss Yorke’s judgment,’ said Mr. Sherridan.

Kitty called Miss Cuthbert, the brightest and most intelligent of the chorus girls, who had attended every rehearsal in the hope that a chambermaid might be wanted. The poor girl was radiant with delight and gratitude.

With this redistribution they took the play again, beginning from the opening scene, and the effect of Kitty’s lively and intelligent acting was simply marvellous. The other actors caught the spirit of comedy she breathed into the work; the action proceeded without a hitch, the motive became comprehensible, the situations developed in a natural order, and every point told. The spirits of actors, manager, and author rose as if by magic,

and for my own part I could scarcely contain the delight I felt in Kitty's triumph.

When Miss Cooper returned, expecting to find the company at a dead-lock, and her brother prepared to apologize for his outburst of temper, and discovered that they were all bustling through the scenes with unprecedented interest and spirit, not a soul taking the slightest notice of her, the mortification she felt can be imagined. From the stalls, where I sat, I saw her standing looking on from the wing, where she thought she was unseen, biting the thumb of her glove viciously. But she could not endure it long, and it was as well for her that she left before the end of the rehearsal, for the congratulations Kitty received and the satisfaction and content in every face would surely have made her discomfiture unendurable.

Success makes everybody amiable. Cooper

was not the same man. When we met on the stage he shook hands cordially, telling me that he felt like shaking hands with himself.

‘How do you think it goes now, Holder-ness?’ he asked.

‘Splendid! Capital!’ I replied.

‘Yes,’ he replied cheerfully. ‘I think we’ve got hold of a big thing. I’ve weighed it up, and I think it will do.’

If one had asked his opinion before the rehearsal he would have ‘weighed it up’ with a very different result.

Mr. Sherridan overtook us as we were going home from the theatre.

‘What can I say to you, Miss Yorke?’ he said. ‘You have not only brought my play to life, but given it strength to live. Success is said to make men ungrateful, but no success can make me forget that I owe everything to you.’

Kitty blushed with pleasure, and made

but a poor reply to this compliment, being embarrassed by the impulsive warmth of this handsome young gentleman's address. But her constraint soon wore off as our conversation turned upon the comedy ; she had so much to say on that subject. We talked about nothing else till we parted at the door of our lodgings.

CHAPTER V.

A DISCOVERY.

WE continued our tour in the North, playing the burlesque at night, rehearsing the comedy in the morning, and enjoying our leisure hours to the utmost. For though the fine weather made business shockingly bad, to be sure, it gave us on the other hand a vast deal of enjoyment in visiting the places of interest through which we passed. Mr. Sherridan was continually with us, and neglected no opportunity of giving us pleasure. Finding that Kitty and I liked the country and driving, he hired a carriage and took us out every

afternoon ; on Sundays we spent the whole day in some pleasant excursion. He and Kitty had an inexhaustible theme of conversation in the comedy, and they never tired of talking about it. It seemed to me they could think of nothing else, but I fancy now that I was mistaken on that point.

Kitty had a real passion for her profession, and her knowledge of stagecraft, together with a natural fund of humour, enabled her to make many admirable suggestions, which Mr. Sherridan acted upon in bringing the comedy into form. He declared that the play was as much hers as his. Every rehearsal furnished fresh material for discussion in the afternoon, and though I could not take the same deep interest in this everlasting subject (which, indeed, became in time somewhat monotonous to me), I was quite content to smoke my pipe in the calm satisfaction of seeing

Kitty so supremely happy. I was not compelled to take part in their discussion ; they could do very well without me, and suffered me to occupy my mind with my own reflections in peace.

Mr. Sherridan's attachment to us, and especially to Kitty, doubtless added to Miss Cooper's exasperation after setting her cap at him. I know that she tried her utmost to excite the jealousy of the company and make us dissatisfied. Mr. Sherridan was freehanded, courteous, and considerate with everybody, and Kitty's tact, her modesty and unswerving good temper, won all to her side. To play constantly to bad houses was dispiriting, to be sure, but we consoled ourselves with the belief that the comedy would change all that. We were all confident that we should have a long run of good luck when that was produced. But what made us truly contented was that, despite bad business, our salaries were

paid regularly. There had been only one blank Treasury Day, and before that could create serious difficulty, Cooper had found the money to pay what he owed us and silence our whispered fears. It was a mystery to me then where he got that money from, and it puzzled me still more to observe how well he bore up against adversity, and with what light indifference he treated the bad returns from the box office. He was as cheerful as a cricket, yet I knew he must be losing money every night by the disastrous run of the burlesque. I could only account for it by giving him credit for unbounded faith in the pecuniary success of the comedy.

One afternoon when Kitty was so occupied with her dressmaker that she could not possibly leave the house, Mr. Sherridan asked me to go for a walk with him.

‘Well,’ said I, as we started out, ‘the time is growing short now. Cooper told

me last night that he intends to produce the play at Chester.' I felt it necessary to talk shop to him, and settled that I was in for a good batch of it.

'Yes,' replied he gravely, 'in ten days I shall know whether I am to sink or swim.'

'It's not quite so crucial as that, surely, sir; for even if this piece doesn't take you may write another that will.'

'No,' he replied in the same grave tone. 'I shall never have another such chance as this. Without such help as I've had from Miss Yorke the play could never have been what it is. And if with such help I fail, I shall never attempt to write another. Failure involves a great deal more than you suspect, Holderness.' He turned his eyes to me with that kind smile which made his face so pleasant to look into. 'It is not simply the temporary gratification of literary ambition that I am striving for, but the happiness of a lifetime.'

I was astonished to hear this ; but to avoid the appearance of being inquisitive I observed that the play would be produced under favourable conditions, as the house would be sure to fill in consequence of its being Cup week at Chester.

‘ Yes,’ said he, pulling his moustache reflectively ; ‘ but I regret that we’re going to produce it there. My grandfather is the Rector of St. Botolph’s, and I’m afraid he’ll be horribly scandalized by seeing my name placarded over the town—perhaps cheek by jowl with his own—mine as the author of a farcical comedy, his in connection, maybe, with some pious function.’

‘ There is nothing dishonourable in the profession of a dramatist, and I should have thought that in this age of religious toleration——’

‘ Religious toleration draws the line at farcical comedy—on the wrong side ; and a dramatist to be honoured must have lived,

and died, at least half a century ago. My grandfather is not a bigot, not an unjust or ungenerous man, but I fear he will be greatly offended with me—and I have already disappointed him grievously. Oh, I've given him a lot of trouble ; so did my father when he was a young fellow. My grandfather wanted him to be a parson. That was not my father's vocation ; he could not stand clerical society. There was a split. My father went to London, and lived by his wits. He married ; my mother died in giving birth to me. A maternal aunt looked after me till my father, who went out as a war correspondent, was killed in venturing too near the lines at Gravelot ; then my grandfather took me in hand. I was only a little chap then, but from the very first he made me understand that one day I was to be a parson. It didn't matter to me then what I was to be ; when I grew a bit older I thought it would be rather a

good thing to be petted by all the nice girls in the parish and thunder from the pulpit at those who were less agreeable. It was only towards the end of my term at Oxford, when I began to think seriously for myself, that I came to the conviction that I could never be a parson. I remember it was after a particularly jolly boat-race night in town that I settled that question. I told my grandfather at once. We fought a long battle over it. I was a prig—every young man just after taking his degree is. I tackled the old gentleman on scientific and conscientious grounds. Put it to him whether a man with my views on evolution and things in general could honestly subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles. I wanted to be a barrister, and my poor old grandfather, seeing that I would not be a parson, yielded to my wishes. I went up to London with the most serious intention to study, and prove to the satisfaction of

my grandfather that I had rightly chosen the profession for which nature intended me, and before the end of a twelvemonth I had to call upon him to pay my turf debts.'

'You proved at any rate that you were not exactly fitted for the Church,' said I.

'Yes, and also that I had the ability if left to my own devices to ruin my grandfather as well as myself. And recognising that fact, the dear old Vicar, after paying my debts, made me a present of a handsome cheque, with the promise that he would never give me another penny as long as he lived, nor pay another shilling of my debts, no matter how contracted. He told me that I had broken his heart, and that the only hope left to him was that he might never see my face again. I cannot say that this sharp lesson made me a prudent man ; but a sense of decency, pride, what you will, made me determine to avoid making debts

which would compel me to seek further assistance from my grandfather. I cut the turf. In time I became a barrister ; but my first brief has yet to come. A little literary work on magazines has helped me to eke out the means furnished by my grandfather ; but my capital has gradually diminished, and I have come now to the last of it. If my play fails I must try another profession—the army for choice. What do you think, Hölderness,’ he asked with a grim touch of humour : ‘there’s the makings of a decent guardsman in me, isn’t there ?’

‘Good gracious, Mr. Sherridan !’ I exclaimed. ‘You surely do not seriously contemplate enlisting ? Your grandfather cannot be so inexorable but that he would help you to tide over present difficulties, till you win a better position at the Bar.’

‘I don’t know,’ he said slowly, in a reflective tone.

‘Have you never communicated with him since that catastrophe?’

‘I went down to see him when I was flushed with the success of being admitted to the Bar. Not to ask for help, but thinking it would please him to know that I hadn’t degenerated into a regular bad lot. He refused to see me. After that, naturally, I did not feel disposed to press the point.’

‘But, pardon me, Mr. Sherridan, ought you not to pocket your pride in order to avoid such a calamity as that of becoming a common soldier?’

‘M—yes, I think I must,’ he said in a tone of resignation. ‘But I fear the production of my play in Chester will curdle any drain of the milk of human kindness that remains in the old gentleman’s breast.’

He walked on for some distance in gloomy silence, and then, rousing himself, he said :

‘I felt it right to tell you this, Holderness.’

‘I am flattered by your confidence, Mr. Sherridan ; but I do not see any necessity for your taking the trouble to tell me your history.’

‘It was only fair that you should know my position. Now, if the play fails you will not be astonished at my quietly dropping out of sight. You will tell Miss Yorke my story, and she will not think ill of me if I never turn up again after the first night.’ He spoke with a little tremor in his manly voice, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground.

‘But,’ said I, to encourage hope, ‘if it succeeds——’

‘Oh, then,’ he cried, lifting his head, his face lighting up with joy and hope—‘then it will still be advisable for you to know who I am, and all about me ; for I shall ask Miss Yorke to be my wife.’

I was too astounded by this announcement to reply ; the astonishment in my face seemed

to amuse him, for he smiled as he continued after a brief pause :

‘Now, going back to our starting-point, you know why the happiness of my life depends upon the success of the play.’

We parted at Mr. Sherridan’s hotel, and I went home in a flutter of hope and fear—delighted beyond measure at one moment to think that Kitty might become the wife of this splendid young fellow, and depressed to the last degree the next moment by the reflection that within a fortnight we might lose him for ever. The more I thought about him the more I liked him, and my admiration was considerably heightened by the revelation he had thought fit to make. It struck me that he had behaved with a very fine sense of honour in the self-restraint he had exercised with regard to Kitty, betraying nothing of the love he felt for her—so far as I could see—that might lead her to form expectations which must be overthrown by

the failure of his play. I could not even find fault with his imprudence ; for how little principle can the man have, thought I, who willingly blinds himself to conscientious scruples and accepts a spiritual office for temporal ends ; and what a poor-spirited thing must he be, who conducts himself like a saint at the age of one-and-twenty ; and how mercenary and servile his nature, who abandons an independent career for a lucrative office which is repugnant to his tastes !

Kitty was curious to know what we had been talking about in the course of our walk. But I replied evasively, not daring to tell her the plain truth. It would be early enough to tell her Mr. Sherridan's history after the success or failure of his play was determined ; and as for the main fact that he loved her, I resolved that she should hear it from his lips or not at all, for it could well be a life-long disappointment to know

that such a handsome, affectionate and gallant gentleman might have been her husband. But I behaved so oddly at tea-time—now losing myself in sombre meditation, presently breaking out into a cheerful whistle, as fear or hope governed my mind, that I believe Kitty, from one or two shrewd glances she cast at me, concluded I had been drinking a little too much on the excursion.

The impending fate of the play now excited me to such an extraordinary degree that I was anxious to have the opinion of everyone interested; and finding Cooper on the stage after the fall of the curtain, I tackled him on the subject.

‘I’ve arranged a nice little overture for the new piece, and a couple of entr’actes,’ I began, rubbing my hands.

‘No wonder you’re so chipper,’ said he; ‘two entr’actes and an overture—half an hour’s work a night. *You* won’t do too much for your screw.’

‘It’s the prospect of a good run——’

‘And nothing to do for a long while,’ he interrupted with a laugh.

‘You will have your joke,’ said I; ‘but you know well enough that a light score never made me cheerful. If I could do anything to make this piece go I’d do it.’

‘I know you would,’ he replied kindly, slipping his hand under my arm and leading me down from the scene the carpenters were striking; and then, dropping his voice, he continued: ‘By the way, Holderness, can you let me have fifty or sixty pounds?’

I looked at him to see if he were joking still; but he was as grave as a judge now, and I perceived that I had let myself in for a pretty thing with my confounded good-nature.

‘I can let you have it back as soon as we begin to pick up a bit,’ he continued, observing my hesitation. ‘The play is bound to go—if we can only start it.’

The significance of this last phrase overcame my qualms. All my savings were invested in my brother's business, but I promised to write and ask Charles for the sum required.

‘When do you think you'll have it?’ he asked.

‘To-day's Friday,’ said I; ‘if I write to-morrow he will get my letter on Monday, and I shall possibly have a reply by Wednesday.’

This did not seem to satisfy him, for, walking me along the stage, he continued in the same confidential undertone :

‘You see, I relied on getting a hundred quid to-night, but the party I expected it from, like all the rest of us, is tight up. He hasn't failed before, or else we should have shut up shop long ago. You know who I mean.’

‘Not a bit,’ I replied.

‘Oh, I thought he would have told you

all about it—you're so thick. It's Sheridan who's been paying the "exes" this last three weeks. I'm surprised he didn't tell you.'

'I'm not. He's too much a gentleman to betray the secret of services rendered to a friend.'

'I didn't think of that. Yes, he is a brick. I thought he had any amount of money at his command by the freeness with which he spends it. But it seems he's down to the bottom of his resources, and doesn't easily see his way to raising more. It's d——d awkward. To-morrow's treasury, you know, and there's the travelling expenses to Bradford on Monday. Couldn't you let me have, say, twenty or thirty to-morrow, old man ?'

'I haven't got it, my dear boy. There's Kitty's new dresses for the show, and the dressmaking; when I've paid my lodgings and everything, I shan't have forty shillings left.'

‘A good job you’ve got that,’ said he, disengaging his arm with a laugh, ‘for there’ll be no salaries to-morrow, for a sure thing. And I must put the screw on our friend the author, or we may not have enough to carry us on to Chester, Monday week.’

I scarcely doubted that Mr. Sherridan, under pressure, would sink his pride and appeal to his grandfather for a sum of money; but the likelihood of his getting the advance seemed to me so improbable that I wrote the next morning begging my brother Charles to send me a cheque for one hundred pounds to the theatre at Bradford.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR LOVE OF KITTY.

WHEN Cooper the next day informed his company that he must postpone the payment of salaries until we reached Bradford, there was only one amongst us who heard the announcement with satisfaction, and that one was Miss Alice Cooper.

From the day she threw up her part, the ill-conditioned young person had not ceased to make herself objectionable to her brother, Mr. Sherridan, Kitty, and me. She did not attempt to conceal her animosity to us, and her desire to frustrate the production of the new play was palpable to all. By all the

means in her power she endeavoured to create a feeling of hostility and dissatisfaction in the company, and though she only succeeded in sowing the seeds of discord amongst us she gained a considerable hold upon Mr. Brewster, who was to play the part of Lieutenant Mackaw in 'The Blue-stocking.' She flirted with him abominably, and I felt sure that if she could induce him to throw up his part at the last moment she would. And this was the more to be feared because we had no understudy for that character. Happily the young man was in a very seedy and out-at-elbows condition, and for that reason was less liable to yield to seduction, and sacrifice an engagement which might set him on his legs. Miss Cooper's aim was to shake his faith in the success of the piece, and so weaken his objection to deserting us. As her brother proclaimed the suspension of the salary list, I saw a gleam of savage satisfaction in her

face ; she nudged Brewster with her elbow, and nodded to him with a glance that said as clearly as words, ' There you are ! I told you so ! ' They were together all day on Sunday. They went to Fordham Castle in a fly ; it was obvious who paid the expenses, for the young man had not enough to furnish himself with a new paper collar. Cooper saw what was going on, and the danger that lay before us, well enough. On Monday, when we got to Bradford, he said to me privately :

' I've put the screw on our young friend, Holderness ; but you might write to your brother for that sixty, in case of accidents.'

I nodded, but did not tell him that I had already written for a hundred, feeling that it would be hard enough to lend the money if the worst came to the worst.

Wednesday came and went. Our salaries were still unpaid ; I had received no answer

from my brother. Miss Cooper and Brewster went off after the show with Miss De Vere and our low comedian to take supper together. Miss C. in exuberant spirits, the rest with conspiracy written on their tell-tale faces, and Cooper was by turns irritable and moody. My anxiety increased to such a pitch that when I found no letter for me in the stage-door keeper's room I telegraphed to my brother to know if he had received my letter. In the course of an hour a reply came :

‘ Absent since Sunday. Just returned. Will write you to-day.’

That afternoon Kitty and I were alone, Mr. Sherridan having gone to London, as I believe, to see if he could raise money there. Shortly after dinner there was a knock at the street door : we heard a murmur of voices in the passage ; and then the woman of the house came into our sitting-room and presented a card, which she

held in the corner of her apron to keep it clean :

The Rev. L. CRAWLEY SHEPHERD, B.A.

*The Vicarage,
St. Botolph's, Chester.*

While we were reading this, Kitty having come to my side, we were startled by a voice quite close to us saying, 'I beg your pardon,' and turning, we found Mr. Crawley Shepherd, who had followed our landlady, standing in the doorway, hat in hand. He was a man of medium stature, about forty, dressed in the clerical style—black button-up waistcoat, long coat, black kid gloves, soft, broad-brimmed felt hat, and the indispensable umbrella, which he held in the delicate manner of a wand. He had a most bland and beaming countenance. From the

beginning to the end of the interview he never ceased to smile. There was gentleness and extreme refinement in every action. When he stepped into the light we perceived that he had sandy hair, thin, carefully parted down the middle, and smoothed down over each temple; he had a perfectly clean-shaven face and lip, his cheeks were rather full and flabby, his complexion sallow and shiny. The amiable habit of smiling had worn deep creases from the wings of his widely-spread nostrils, and these, with his heavy eyelids and the yellow tinge of his eyes, were suggestive of a bilious and not quite healthy temperament.

‘I have to apologize for intruding,’ he said, with an accent of deep regret.

‘Don’t mention it. Take a seat,’ I said, with a flutter as I suddenly recollected that St. Botolph’s was the parish of which Mr. Sherridan’s grandfather was Vicar.

Mr. Shepherd bowed, coughed, raising

the pommel of his umbrella to his lips, and, turning to our landlady, said in his blandest tone :

‘ Thank you so much.’

The poor woman, who lived by letting her lodgings to strolling actors, seemed quite overwhelmed by the urbanity of this sanctified visitor ; however, she took his gracious hint, and left the room softly, closing the door behind her with care, as if she were going out of church before the sermon.

‘ Do you know,’ said Mr. Shepherd, seating himself, ‘ I have come all the way from Chestah on behalf of the Rev. Mr. Rogah Sherridan, the Vicar, to find Mr. John Sherridan ; and oh ! you cannot tell what difficulties I have encountered !’

He had a particularly slow delivery, every word seeming to be pumped up before it came out. His pronunciation was peculiar, for he somehow managed to make each

vowel a combination of all five; his exclamations, jerked from the bottom of the throat, had the sound of an incipient cough, and these singularities, together with an inability to round the final 'r,' were made additionally grotesque by the cheerful manner in which he related his most unfortunate experiences.

'First of all,' he continued, 'I went to the hotel where the Vicar said I might find him, but he was not there. Then I went to the theatre and inquired at the box-office, and they sent me round to the back of the theatre, and at the back of the theatre they sent me round to the front of the theatre again, and at the front of the theatre they sent me once more to the back of the theatre. And thence I was sent to a most unpleasant public-house at the corner of the street; and there was a man who sent me across to another unpleasant public-house on the other side of the road; but at

neithah one nor the othah had they seen Mr. Sherridan ; so I returned again to the theatah, where they said I had bettah take a turn at the coffee-shops, and I might have walked the whole afternoon in a fruitless endeavour, for I really believe they were making fun of me, don't you know, if a charming young lady who happened to be at the stage-door had not come to my assistance. And this charming young lady, amongst other things, informed me that if Mr. Sherridan was to be found anywhere, I should find him here.'

'I believe Mr. Sherridan has gone to London,' said I, cutting short the interminable narrative.

'That is very sad,' he replied gaily, 'for I feah I shall have to return to Chestah with my mission unfulfilled.'

I undertook to deliver any message he might give when Mr. Sherridan returned.

'Thank you so much,' he exclaimed in

the same tone with which he had given the landlady her congé. 'But perhaps you can give me the information I require, if, as I presume from what that charming young lady told me, you are Mr. Sherridan's intimate friends.'

'Yes,' said I, fancying I saw the drift of this visit, and anxious to serve our friend, 'we have the strongest regard for Mr. Sherridan, as everyone must have who knows him well; and I think we may claim the privilege of being his most intimate friends, my niece and I.'

'Oh, this young lady is your niece,' he said, wreathing Kitty in his smile.

'My niece, Miss Yorke.'

'This is an unexpected pleasure. I am so proud to make your acquaintance, Miss Yorke. Do you know, your name is all ovah Chestah?'

'We open there next week,' said Kitty.

'In "The Blue-stockings," by Mr. J. Vernon

Sherridan. Oh' (he assumed an arch expression, and shook his finger at Kitty as if he were scolding a child), 'I have seen those naughty, naughty bills!'

Kitty flushed up at this. I, too, did not know what to think, for as yet we in the theatre had not seen one of the new bills. Mr. Shepherd continued, in the same tone of gentle chiding :

'And I saw your portrait too, in that public-house at the corner of the street.'

'I hope you found nothing naughty in that,' Kitty said sharply.

'Oh dear no! I only wished to imply that your versatility is no secret from me. It is not everybody who can play in comedy and burlesque also. *Please* do not think that I am an enemy of the drama, for I assure you I am not. When the Vicar told me that his grandson was a play-writer I did my utmost to moderate his anger and defend the dramatic art. Indeed, I have

made this long journey from Chestah in ordah to justify Mr. Sherridan if possible and move the Vicah to a spirit of forgiveness and love. I desiah to go back to this vexed old gentleman and say, "Take your grandson into your bosom, for he is a good young man, not given to riotous living with dissolute companions, nor prone to drunkenness and debauchery." "

Hearing this, Kitty grew white with anger, her brows bending and her lip curling in scorn; and it was scorn alone that gave her dignity to remain silent. For my own part, I felt more inclined to laugh at this description of what our dear friend was not.

'Well, sir,' said I, rising, 'you may assure the Vicar that his grandson is free from all the faults you have enumerated, and you can add on my authority that, play-writer or not, a better man never lived. Certainly, if anyone knows his character we do, for

morn, noon, and eve we've seen him, day after day, ever since we met at Sheffield.'

'Thank you so much,' cried the Rev. Crawley Shepherd, squeezing my hand and giving it a series of short sharp jerks. 'I go rejoicing, for I have not come in vain !'

He offered his hand with the same genial effusiveness to Kitty ; but she declined it with the most frigid little bow.

'You had no business to answer one word about Mr. Sherridan, uncle,' she said angrily, when I returned to the room after conducting Mr. Shepherd to the street door. 'You ought to have seen that he was pumping you.'

'Pumping me !' I exclaimed.

'Yes. It was Alice Cooper who sent him. He came here to see what kind of people we were. And instead of resenting his impudence and showing him the door——'

‘My dear,’ I expostulated, ‘one should answer a fool according to his folly.’

‘Fool! He is none. He is a hypocrite and a cad. He couldn’t smile like that if he weren’t.’

In the evening Cooper asked me again about the money, and I then took the opportunity to question him about the bill he had posted in Chester.

‘Oh yes, they came from the printer’s last week, and the advance agent has billed Chester well,’ said he, with a laugh not altogether free from embarrassment.

‘Mr. Sherridan has said nothing to me about them,’ said I.

‘He hasn’t seen ’em. I don’t want him to, either, till the last moment. Fact is, Holderness,’ he continued with increased uneasiness, and scratching his jaw, ‘that fool of a printer’s made a mess of it. It won’t do the comedy any harm, but I’m afraid the cut won’t please Sherridan’s delicate taste.’

I told the printer to do a blue-socking, you know. The idea was striking, and did not cost much to cut. I couldn't run to a lot for posters. I've got one in my room ; come up and see it. There's nothing indelicate in a blue-socking, is there ?

'No,' said I ; 'we see 'em often enough in the shop windows.'

'Just so. That was my idea. But you'll see what the printer's done with it.'

He took me up in his room and showed me an enormous poster, on which was the cut in question. It was a simple blue-socking, to be sure, but with the addition of a natty little shoe, and filled out with a shapely limb. Above it was the announcement :

'First night of "The Blue-socking," a farcical comedy by John Vernon Sherridan, Esq.,' and below, '"The Blue-socking"—Miss Kitty Yorke.'

I was horrified. If anything could shock

and outrage the feelings of the Rev. Roger Sherridan, it was this vulgar and suggestive cut plastered, it may be, against the very gates of his church for all his congregation to see.

Mr. Sherridan returned the next day, and I knew from his manner and Cooper's growing despondency that he had failed to raise money in London. I was equally certain that he could expect nothing from his grandfather. And on Friday that conviction was verified. Without any sign of emotion, Mr. Sherridan told me that he had received a letter from his grandfather declining to give him any pecuniary assistance. He said no more than that, and naturally he did not show me the letter. But I have seen it since, and this is what his grandfather said :

‘MY GRANDSON,

‘Promise me upon your honour never to write another stage play, *and to*

sever all connection with Miss Yorke and her family, and that part of my fortune which I intended to leave you at my death I will settle upon you now. Refuse this condition, and I will revoke the will I have made in your favour, and you shall have nothing from me now or hereafter. I give you twenty-four hours for consideration; after that, if I do not receive your acceptance of my offer, I shall act as if I had your refusal.

‘Your grandfather,

‘ROGER SHERRIDAN.’

Mr. Sherridan had not taken twenty-four hours to consider the proposal; he had written immediately declining it — refusing a fortune, not, I am sure, for the sake of writing plays, but for his love of Kitty.

CHAPTER VII.

WE ARE DRIVEN TO TAKE A DESPERATE
REMEDY.

AT that time, as I have said, we knew nothing of the sacrifice Mr. Sherridan had made, and there was nothing in his behaviour to betoken even a moment's regret or a passing doubt as to the wisdom of the course he had taken. When I told him of the visit we had received from Mr. Crawley Shepherd, he raised his eyebrows with a smile of intelligence—it explained to him his grandfather's stipulation with regard to us. I believe he would have plucked out his tongue rather than let

Kitty suspect by a word that his devotion to her had cost him a fortune. He spoke hopefully of success, and did his best to reason us out of our fears respecting the production of his play.

‘Brewster and the rest are more likely to play Miss Cooper false than us,’ he said. ‘They’ll put as much pressure on Cooper as they can for the sake of ready money ; but when it comes to the pinch they will not gratify her by throwing up an engagement which may bring in their unpaid salaries. They have all to lose and nothing to gain by that piece of folly. Cooper himself will not suffer that. He is keeping his purse shut as tightly as he can, but when the crisis comes he’ll open it to avoid a fiasco. Oh, he’ll produce the play ; the only question is whether he will find it advisable to run it.’

Kitty, laying the tea-things at that moment, turned about with the bread-plate

in her hand, and, her eyes flashing conviction, cried :

‘It *shall* run. If we get it on the stage we will make it go. Oh, I should be miserable if I doubted that!’

‘Ah! ah!’ said I in a bantering tone. ‘You think the play will make your fortune?’ and turning to Mr. Sherridan, with a wink, I added: ‘Kitty, I’ll be bound, dreams of nothing but press notices, and London managers offering her leading parts, and is working up on the quiet as an understudy for Ellen Terry.’

Kitty shrugged her shoulders.

‘Certainly, I want to get out of burlesque and pantomime,’ said she, ‘and I should be glad to have a little more money to spend. We are all selfish to some extent. But that’s not everything.’ She glanced from me to Mr. Sherridan, and with a blush continued her occupation at the table. Then, after a moment’s pause, as if not

ashamed of the thought that had silenced her, she added in a quiet tone : ' One may be selfish, and yet have a disinterested wish for the success and triumph of one's friends.'

Mr. Sherridan, who was seated by the window bending forward with his elbows resting on his knees, regarding her with inexpressible tenderness in his strong face, jumped up with an exclamation of admiration, as though by an uncontrollable impulse. I thought he was about to tell her there and then that he loved her, and that if he made a fortune she would share it with him ; but he checked himself in the instant, and, fetching the kettle from the fire, filled the teapot Kitty held in her hand, saying only, but with significant emotion in his mellow voice : '*You are a little brick, Kitty ?*'

It was the first time he had ever addressed her by that name, familiar as we were, and Kitty flushed and smiled responsively, hearing him.

‘Why, somehow,’ she said, ‘the piece seems to be part of our life, like a living creature that we have set ourselves to bring up, doesn’t it? We have thought so much about it, and worked so hard to pull it together, and it has given us so much pleasure! It’s dreadful to think that after next Tuesday there’ll be nothing more to do at it—no more rehearsals.’ Her voice fell, and she turned hurriedly to the cupboard, where she was a long time finding what it was she sought. She was thinking, poor girl! that after the production of the play Mr. Sherridan would leave us, and we should see him no more. I saw that, and I think Mr. Sherridan also perceived what was in her mind. The reflection could not have failed to strike him that for another reason than that in her mind the result of next Tuesday’s performance might separate him from her for ever.

Well, we did our best to make each

other regard the matter cheerfully ; nevertheless, the aspect of things on Saturday was desperately bad. I had received my brother's letter on Friday night ; my spirits fell when I opened it and found nothing in the form of a remittance inside. He had overdrawn his account at the bank. Money was tight. He couldn't possibly raise a hundred pounds without a few days' notice, but if I still wanted cash he would do his best to send some in a few days. When I showed the letter to Cooper, he told me to wire Charles at once to send as much as he could immediately. 'There'll be a runpus this afternoon,' said he, 'and if we can't get a bit of money by Monday the shop must be shut up.'

Everyone knew there would be no salaries paid that day ; nevertheless, at the usual time we all collected on the stage. Presently Cooper came down from his room with his brisk, jaunty air, nodded to us,

and made a nice little speech of a half-humorous kind, regretted his inability to pay, and promised all sorts of good things as soon as we got to Chester. He was very good at this sort of thing, and prided himself on being able to keep his company in good humour. I expected a general outburst, but the company, after hearing him out, left the theatre almost without a murmur. This result surprised me; but what astonished me still more was to find that Cooper, who might have felt flattered by the success of his speech, seemed the very reverse of satisfied by it. 'They've got some confounded plot on,' he muttered, when I went to congratulate him, 'and that d——d Alice is at the bottom of it.' And I felt sure that he was right in this surmise when on our way home to tea we saw the whole gang streaming into a restaurant with Brewster and Miss Cooper at the head.

It wasn't long before we discovered what was in the wind. In the evening, as I was smoking my pipe at the stage-door waiting for the call, my second fiddle, an old friend named Johnson, joined me, and said :

‘Holderness, they are going to ask the governor to let them go on to Chester to-morrow instead of Monday ; and, as we took his speech so kindly this afternoon, he may be disposed to agree, especially as it won't make any difference in the price whether they travel to-morrow or the next day. But just you give him the straight tip, and tell him to refuse.’

‘Why ?’ I asked in astonishment.

‘Well, I don't mind telling you, because I don't hold with these double-dealings, and Alice Cooper is a two-faced brimstone baggage. They know that Cooper won't part, and they know he can't get anything more out of Mr. Sherridan.’

‘How do they know that ?’

‘Why, Alice Cooper knows he went up to London to raise the wind if he could, and he couldn’t, or we should have got our screw. Moreover, we know Cooper had drained him dry, because Brewster, meeting him in the High Street this morning, noticed that his watch-chain was dangling loose. Thinking he’d had his watch nicked, he (Brewster) said: “I beg your pardon, sir, but I am afraid someone has taken your watch.” “No, thank you, it’s all right,” says Sherridan. “I left it in London to be repaired.” Well, we *all* know what that means. He’s pawned it.’

‘Poor fellow!’ said I; ‘well, go on, Johnson.’

‘Mark my words, Holderness,’ said he: ‘they’re not going to play on Tuesday night. They’re going to shut Cooper up, and do their best to ruin Mr. Sherridan and all who stick to him—that’s you and your niece. You can see Alice Cooper in that.’

‘What are they going to do, then?’

‘Why, they know that if he breaks his engagement the theatre will be to let, and they’re going to take it for the week, and do a variety show. It’s all mapped out. They’ve got three parts of the band on their side, and the thing’s to be worked on a kind of co-operative principle.’

‘I don’t see how they’re to be stopped if they choose to go on to-morrow.’

‘Oh, there’s some half-hearted ones among the rioters. They believe in the play, and won’t decide on chucking Cooper over until they know that there’s nothing to be got out of him at the last moment. One thing they hope to get out of him, and that’s their travelling expenses to Chester.’

‘What’s their idea in going on to-morrow?’

‘Oh, they want to get the start of Cooper, and make sure of the lessee in case Cooper can’t produce.’

I found an opportunity of laying these facts before Cooper as my band was going down to the orchestra.

‘I thought so,’ said he, when he had heard what I had to say. ‘By George, I have a good mind to shut up to-night. I should save the travelling “exes,” anyhow.’

‘I’ll hold myself responsible for them,’ said I, the perspiration breaking out on my temples as I thought of the disastrous blow to my poor Kitty’s future happiness. ‘And my brother is sure to send something by Monday.’

‘I could keep them going—hang ‘em!—with fifty pounds; but I’ve made up my mind to stick to the little that’s left in the old stocking.’

I felt sure Charles would send me as much as that, and I said so.

‘Well, it all depends on that. By George! they shan’t get to Chester half an hour before it’s time to run the rag up on the

last night of the burlesque, unless they choose to pay their own fares. Send another wire to your brother, Holderness. It's not too late. We must have that fifty or cave in.'

On Sunday Mr. Sherridan, Kitty, and I went on to Chester, and the first advertisement that caught our eyes at the station was that abominable bill. It was too striking to escape notice. That dreadful blue limb was everywhere. The roughs already accumulating in the town for the approaching races stopped before it grinning and making unpleasant observations; the respectable inhabitants on their way to church studiously averted their eyes, looking more severe than ever; Kitty and Mr. Sherridan were too vexed to say a word about it while they were together; but Kitty, when we were alone, gave free expression to her feeling of anger and shame.

'If it wasn't for the play and Mr.

Sherridan,' she declared, 'I would throw up my part. It is shameful.'

'It's too bad of Cooper,' said Mr. Sherridan, as I walked with him from our new lodgings to his own. 'Poor Kitty—and my grandfather! No wonder he refused to help me! However, it will be seen that she is guiltless of indelicacy; and if it fill the house, as I suppose it will, we may forget the present annoyance.'

This affair added to my anxiety. I felt that the play must be produced, if only to clear Kitty and Sherridan from this stigma. For if that were not done, I foresaw clearly enough that Alice Cooper and her set would circulate all sorts of lies about it, and leave the public to believe perhaps that the production had been prohibited by the lessee.

I could not sleep that night for thinking of these things and torturing myself with the innumerable misgivings and apprehensions to which they gave rise.

By eight o'clock on Monday morning I was up and dressed before Kitty, and, going to the theatre, I hunted up the stage door-keeper for the letter I expected from my brother Charles. There was nothing for me. I could have sworn with vexation and disappointment. On my way home I resolved that I would go up to London and get the money we so much needed from my brother by hook or by crook. Kitty found me poring over a Bradshaw when she came down, and seeing my trouble and vexation (which was in no wise lessened by the difficulty of understanding the railway guide) she pressed me to tell her what was on my mind. I had kept my secret all through Sunday, for I saw no advantage to be gained by adding to the anxiety of Kitty and Mr. Sherridan; but now I was compelled to tell her of the conspiracy Alice Cooper and her gang had formed to ruin the play, and of my intention to go to London

and get the fifty pounds which alone could save us. Hearing this, she became as anxious as I to find out what Bradshaw meant, and between us we came to the conclusion that a train left Chester for London at ten o'clock.

We hurried through our breakfast and started for the station a good half-hour before it was necessary, Kitty insisting on going to see me off. And well it was that she did, for on the way it occurred to her that, having so much time to spare, we might as well call again at the theatre to see if by chance another post had come in. Sure enough this was the case, and amongst the pile of letters on the porter's table we found the expected letter from my brother. To our intense joy, there was a nice clean cheque inside ; but our hearts fell again like lead when on opening it we found that it was only for twenty pounds. And the letter dispelled all hope of getting more, for my brother, in

apologizing for the smallness of the amount, stated that he wrote in haste, as he had to leave London for the Continent that day (Saturday) on business which would not admit of delay. So we turned our backs on the railway-station and returned to our lodging in terrible despondency. I had not a word to say. The case seemed to me now perfectly hopeless.

‘After all, twenty pounds is something,’ said Kitty after awhile, in a tone which showed that her young and active brain was less prostrated by this blow than mine. ‘If Cooper finds he can’t get more he might take twenty.’

‘Oh, he’d take it fast enough,’ said I bitterly. ‘But what good would that do us? He says he *can’t* produce the play unless he gets fifty pounds, and so far as our happiness is concerned we might just as well throw the money in the river, down there.’

Kitty must have seen the justice of this observation, for she made no reply, and we walked on slowly in silence. After awhile, coming to a seat on the old wall, I said gloomily : ‘ We may as well sit down.’

Kitty seated herself by my side, and said not a word, while I filled my pipe and lighted it. We looked down upon the race-course, and the field stretching away in a great semicircle to the shining river. Within the course all was activity and movement, men, women, and children all busy in setting up the booths, swings, whirligigs and shooting-galleries in preparation for the races. I looked on idly as I smoked, with the vacant mind of a man out of employment already, and seeing no chance of a new engagement. Kitty also looked down on the course, but a glance showed me that her mind was fully occupied.

‘ Do you know anything about racing, uncle ?’ she asked suddenly.

‘Not much, my dear,’ said I. ‘Once I ventured half a crown in a sweepstake and lost it. That was when I was quite young. I haven’t been on the turf since.’

‘I heard a man say to another just now that he could get three to one on May Blossom for any amount. What did that mean?’

I explained the affair as well as I could. Kitty nodded, and there was another pause. Presently she said :

‘Uncle, how much money do you owe me?’

‘Well, altogether, I think you have saved a little over thirty pounds,’ said I. ‘Why?’

‘Because, if you are not going to let Cooper have that cheque, I shall be much obliged if you will let me have it.’

‘Certainly, I would much rather give it to you than to Cooper. Besides, you’ve a right to draw your money whenever you like.’

‘ And use it how I please ?’

‘ To be sure ; only I should like to know how you are going to employ it ’

‘ I’ll tell you,’ said she, jumping up with fixed determination in her face ; ‘ I am going to back May Blossom or any other horse that may turn that twenty pounds into sixty.’

CHAPTER VIII.

WE GO ON THE TURF, KITTY AND I.

It took my breath away. I withdrew my pipe from my mouth, and could only look at Kitty in bewilderment for a minute or two. Then I said: 'Sit down, my child, and let us talk about this.'

She sat down and listened patiently to all the arguments I could raise against the folly of betting, but her resolution was unshaken.

'After all, it isn't so hopeless as giving the money to Cooper. You agree to that. And the worst horse must sometimes win or no one would bet. And if the chance is

ever so small, it's better than doing nothing with the money. You would not have refused to let me have my money to spend in dresses if I wished to have them; then why should you object to letting me use the money in a way that is a thousand times more to be wished? Look how much we have to win by it—our position, my reputation, and—and—the happiness of a dear friend.' Her soft, kind eyes filled with tears as she referred to Mr. Sherridan. Brushing them away impatiently, she continued: 'And if we lose all, what then? We shall not be much worse off than we are, and for our twenty pounds we shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that we have done our best.'

'Well, my dear,' said I, reluctantly yielding to her persuasion, 'I will not say a word to deprive you of that satisfaction. The money is your own. Do what you like with it;' and I handed

her my brother's letter with his cheque inside.

‘That's not enough, dear,’ she said, pressing my hand gratefully. ‘You must stake the money for me.’

‘I! Why, I don't know the merest terms of the business. We'd better get Mr. Sherridan to do it.’

‘Not for the world,’ she cried. ‘He would know that we should not do such a thing in our own interests.’

At that moment my eye fell upon a couple of loafers who had seated themselves on the boundary rail of the course below. I noticed carelessly, as my thoughts still dwelt on Kitty's proposal, that one of them wore an old gray ulster, and it seemed to me that he was looking up at us. His companion, dressed in a sleeved waistcoat and tight-fitting cord trousers, looked like a stable-help, and was occupied in cleaning out his pipe with a straw. There were

plenty of men as disreputable-looking as they about the field, but these fixed my attention, partly, I believe, because the one in the long ulster was evidently regarding us.

Kitty said something, but I hardly caught what, for it had suddenly dawned upon me that the man below was Kitty's father.

'And if Mr. Johnson knows nothing about racing,' pursued Kitty, 'we must go on the course when the racing begins, and trust to one of those men who stands on boxes and——'

'Why, they're welshers,' said I. 'Come to that, I'd as soon trust Cooper.'

'What are you looking at so strangely, uncle?'

'I, Kitty, looking strangely?'

'Yes; for the last five minutes you've been staring at those two low-looking fellows down there.'

‘Why, the fact is, my dear, I think I know one of them. Used to be on the boards at one time, but he took to horse-racing and that kind of thing. And it just struck me that if anyone could tell us which horse to back, it’s he.’

‘Go down and speak to him at once. I will walk up and down here till you come back. And take this cheque with you.’

I left her, and, following the course of the wall till I came to a flight of steps, made my way down to the course. As I turned towards the place where I had seen Yorke, I perceived him strolling towards me alone. He had divined my intention, and quitted his companion.

‘Kitty is up there. She can see you,’ he said in a warning voice, as I offered him my hand in meeting.

‘That doesn’t matter. She knows I have come down to speak to you.’

‘Have you told her who I am?’

‘It isn’t likely. The poor girl’s got enough trouble on her mind without that.’

It was a harsh thing to tell a father that his daughter would be ashamed of him—as my words implied—but the utter self-abandonment of his appearance excited the same feeling of exasperation which one experiences with one’s self in getting into a mess which might have been avoided by a little proper attention and care. He had not shaved for several days, nor washed either, apparently ; his boots were caked with dry mud, his hat battered and bent ; he wore no collar, and his ulster, which had once been smart, gave him a detestably raffish air. He could see that I regarded him with repugnance ; but neither that nor my observation about Kitty wounded him : he had grown too callous to be hurt by trifles, and he showed his indifference by a grin and a toss of the head.

‘What *did* you tell her ?’ he asked.

‘I said you were an old friend who had quitted the stage to go on the turf.’

‘That’s all right. No need to tell her any more. I came out to look for you—knew you were coming by the bills.’

‘I was surprised to see you here.’

‘Don’t know why you should be, considering the nice opinion you seem to have of me.’

‘True,’ I retorted; ‘I suppose I ought not to feel astonished at finding you in any place where there’s a little rascality going on.’

‘No; birds of a feather *do* flock together, don’t they? Good lot of showmen here altogether—farcical comedy companies and one thing and another.’

‘Are you in a show?’ I asked hopefully.

‘Palled up with a couple of bruisers in a boxing show. I do the talking part of the entertainment.’

‘As long as you get a living honestly,’ I said with a sigh.

Again he expressed his indifference with a grin and a jerk of the head; and then, to turn the subject, he said :

‘Well, I suppose you didn’t leave Kitty to come down here for nothing, Dick?’

‘No; the fact is, we were talking about racing when I caught sight of you; and knowing that you had spent the best years of your life amongst gamblers and persons of that sort, and must know a good deal about the turf, I thought you might give me some advice about to-morrow’s racing.’

He looked at me in astonishment for a moment before he spoke. ‘Do you want a tip—is that what you are driving at?’

‘Yes, that’s it, Bob,’ said I, with a certain feeling of discomfort in revealing our affairs to him.

‘Is Kitty in it?’ he asked.

‘Yes. She sent me down to you. She

has twenty pounds that she wants to lay out at three to one.'

I never saw such a look of incredulous astonishment in any man's face as there was in Bob Yorke's, as he came to a stand and looked at me with round eyes, puckered brows, and his mouth half open.

'Well, I'm dashed!' he gasped at last. 'You come down here and talk to me like a district-visitor, as good as telling me that I'm about as bad as they make 'em, and you wind up by cadging for a tip, and asking how you're to lay twenty quid on a horse at three to one. You're a nice old party, Dick, to trust with the bringing up of an only daughter, I must say! It seems *you* want a talking to. And I tell you,' he continued with growing warmth, 'I came out with the purpose of hauling you over the coals if I got a chance. Look here, my highly-respectable moralist, I want to know something about this comedy you've put my

gal into. Those blue-leg posters don't suit my views with regard to Kitty's future—not a little bit.'

'That's all right, Bob ; don't you bother yourself about that.'

'Oh, I shall bother you a good deal more than I bother myself, I tell you. And if I can't get a satisfactory explanation, it will be a matter of serious consideration whether I ought not to take Kitty out of your hands and bring her up according to my own notions.'

I scarcely knew whether he was in earnest or jest, for there was a roguish twinkle in his eye at times that suggested the existence of a sense of humour despite his degraded condition. However, I saw that I must explain our position to him, so I told him as briefly as I could all that had happened since our parting, not omitting the facts with regard to Mr. Sheridan's intentions which I had kept secret from Kitty.

He listened with close attention to all I said, only interrupting my story now and then by a question that brought the matter more clearly before him. The point that called most for explanation was that which referred to Mr. Sherridan and his relations with the Vicar.

‘St. Botolph’s — where is that?’ he asked.

‘Why, the church outside the town on the hill,’ I replied.

‘And you say the old man has no other relatives than his grandson?’

‘None that I know of.’

‘Hum! And you believe he has refused to give him any assistance?’

‘I feel sure of it. Indeed, I should think that this affair will cause him to disinherit Mr. Sherridan. However, that’s a trifle if we only get the play on the stage and it proves successful. That may be the stepping-stone to an independent fortune—

which is better than any he might owe to favour—and without doubt it will make Kitty the happiest woman in the world.’

He nodded, sucking hard at his empty pipe in silence with a look of fixed determination on his face.

‘So now,’ I said in conclusion, ‘you know why we want—why we must have that fifty pounds.’

‘Oh, you shall have that—twice the amount. Only I shan’t be able to give it you before to-morrow.’

‘That will do : if I can depend on it by a certain hour.’

‘You may depend on it. Say three o’clock to-morrow afternoon.’

‘If you keep your word, Bob, you will ensure Kitty’s life-long welfare. Of course, you can’t get the money before the first race is run. Here’s the cheque.’

He took the cheque, looked at it, and then handed it back, saying, ‘I shan’t want that,

Dick,' and then, adding hurriedly, 'Meet me here, at the foot of these steps, at three to-morrow,' he turned his back on me and slouched off with the same indolent gait he had when he came to meet me. He glanced askant at a policeman standing by the course; the policeman returned a look of mistrust, and watched him till he joined a knot of idlers near the grand stand and disappeared.

'Has he told you what we are to do?' asked Kitty eagerly, when I rejoined her.

'It's all right, my dear,' said I. 'We shall have to do nothing. He has undertaken to manage it all, and let us have the money by three o'clock to-morrow afternoon.'

She regarded me with blank astonishment for a moment; then she exclaimed:

'What! you have trusted *that* man with the money?'

I thought it best not to undeceive her, so I replied evasively :

‘ The money’s safe, Kitty. He’s an honest man, though he may not look it.’

She heaved a sigh and said no more, because no doubt her reflections were not flattering to my prudence and sagacity. For my own part, I felt terribly uneasy, not from any great apprehension that Kitty’s father would fail to keep his word, but from a fear that the means by which he intended to obtain the money were not such as justified me in accepting it. I tried to gulp down my qualms of conscience ; but this phrase would keep pestering me : ‘ The receiver is worse than the thief.’

Cooper brought the company to Chester about six in the evening ; there was barely time for them to secure lodgings and gulp down a cup of tea before hurrying to the theatre for the last performance of the burlesque. That gave them no time for getting at the

manager, and to keep them out of mischief the next morning a dress rehearsal of 'The Blue-stockings' was called for eleven o'clock sharp.

'All right,' said Cooper gleefully, when I promised him that the fifty pounds should be forthcoming by the next afternoon at 3.30.

'I'll keep 'em at it till the last minute, and Alice shan't enter the theatre after she leaves it to-night. They will fear to take any decisive step without a final consultation with her.'

He kept his word. The next morning the company engaged for the comedy turned up about eleven, but it was twelve before Cooper came in.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' said he, with the utmost assurance, 'you will be glad to hear that I have made arrangements which will permit me to pay you your salaries in full before we separate this morning. Now,

then, we'll go through the rehearsal as quick as possible.'

The members of the company looked at each other, and couldn't make it out, Miss Cooper having assured them that no salaries would be paid. Johnson told me that she had gone off to see the lessee, and so she had ; but when she came back radiant from her interview to let her accomplice Brewster know that the lessee had agreed to let her have the theatre if Cooper was unable to keep his engagement, she found all access to the stage barred. Cooper had stationed the property man and advance agent, who were not included in Miss Cooper's conspiracy, at the stage-door, and they firmly refused to let her pass into the house. Meanwhile the rehearsal was dragging along in the most tedious manner, Cooper insisting on taking scene after scene over again, so that at two o'clock the second act was only beginning. At half-past two he sent out for sandwiches

and ale, but he permitted no one to leave the stage. That was the position of affairs when I left the house to find Yorke. Outside I saw Miss Cooper walking up and down. She looked daggers at me, but said nothing.

I made my way down the steps to the racecourse with difficulty, for the racing had begun, and the crowd of spectators was immense. However, I pushed on, and, getting to the bottom just as the start was given for the three o'clock heat, I found Yorke leaning against the wall.

‘Have you got it?’ I asked, panting with exertion.

He nodded, and jerked his head sidelong, that I should accompany him to a place where we might be less open to observation.

CHAPTER IX.

OUR GREAT SUCCESS.

KITTY's father had a brown-paper parcel under his arm. As we got away from the crowd he handed it to me, saying :

‘There's more than I promised, Dick. But if this event comes off according to your expectations, and if Mr. Sherridan acts up to his promise and makes my Kitty an offer of marriage, I should like her to have the rest for a wedding fit-out, you know.’

A certain hesitation in his manner caused me to say :

‘Bob, this money's all right, isn't it?’

‘Of course it is,’ he answered testily ;

then, after a brief pause, he added in a more tender tone: 'I've been saving it up for her. I've earned it all except the box it's in. That I came across by a fluke; it seemed thrown in my way as a sign. I thought it would look nicer like if you gave it her in that.'

'Do you want me to tell her who it's from?'

'No, better not, Dick,' he returned, with some reluctance. 'Let her keep on thinking I'm dead and gone till the last. Only you might tell her it's a present from a poor fellow who had a great respect for her mother.' For a moment he gave way under the sense of his great misfortunes; then recovering his self-command, he added: 'I shall see Kitty play again to-night, and then I shall go away. You're not likely to see me again for some time.'

'I thought you were in a show here, Bob.'

‘So I was, but we had a row yesterday, and I’m on another job now. Good-bye, Dick.’

He pressed my hand, and strolled away with his loafing gait and melancholy out-of-luck air. There was a fly at the foot of the hill : I jumped in, and, telling the driver to take me to the theatre, removed the string that bound the parcel Yorke had given me.

On opening the brown paper I found it contained a sandal-wood box, carved all over in deep relief with a curious and very artistic design of birds and foliage. It was about the width and depth of a cigar-box, but longer. It looked old ; the corners were ornamented with black silver, and there was a boss of the same metal in the front. I know very little about such matters, but it was evident even to me that the box was a costly and beautiful piece of workmanship, and I wondered then uneasily by what possible accident it could have

fallen into Yorke's hands. However, there was no time for useless speculation of that kind ; the main thing was to find what the box contained. Pressing the silver boss, the lid opened with a spring, and I perceived inside a packet of bank-notes neatly folded and held together by an elastic band. There were fifteen of them, each worth ten pounds, so that when I had slipped five of them in my waistcoat pocket for Cooper, there remained just a hundred pounds for Kitty.

‘ A nice little wedding-present,’ said I to myself, as I carefully folded them and replaced the packet in the box.

It relieved my mind exceedingly to observe that all the notes were quite fresh and clean, as if they had just come from a bank, which allowed me to believe that they represented the honest savings of Kitty's father. And if he had banked those savings in London, it was obvious that the time de-

manded for furnishing the money was no longer than might be reasonably given to going up to town and drawing his account.

The fly rattled up to the theatre just as I finished tying up the parcel. I was pleased to see Miss Cooper still waiting outside, for that proved that the company had not yet left the theatre. At the entrance, Davis, the property man, told me that the governor was in his room upstairs waiting to see me. I found Cooper in conversation with the lessee, Mr. Fox.

‘Have you got it?’ he asked the moment he entered.

‘Yes,’ said I, handing him the notes from my pocket.

‘There you are,’ said Cooper, holding up the notes as he turned to the lessee. ‘Are you satisfied now?’

‘Yes, I am quite satisfied, Mr. Cooper,’ replied the lessee humbly, ‘and I must apologize for having doubted your solvency.’

‘Well, you must come down and make that clear to the company. It’s the least you can do.’

The lessee acquiesced, and we went down to the stage, where they had just come to the tag of the third act. All the company stood in a semicircle, with Mr. Sherridan on the prompt side, scrip in hand.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said Cooper—he never missed an opportunity of making a speech—‘I have just heard from Mr. Fox, with feelings of the deepest surprise and regret, that a member of my company—I will not mention names—on behalf of other members not less wanting in loyalty and good feeling, has represented to him that I am in a state of bankruptcy, unable to fulfil my engagements and produce the new comedy this evening. Mr. Fox will tell you that he has perfect confidence in me, and that whether the play is produced to-night or not I shall have the sole use of the

theatre until Sunday next. Is that the case, Mr. Fox ?

‘It is,’ said the lessee. ‘Mr. Cooper can produce the play or keep the house closed as he pleases.’

The conspirators looked terribly uncomfortable. After a brief pause, Cooper continued :

‘Now, if I chose to turn nasty I might just shut up the show and leave you to get out of the hole you have got into as you best could. But I’m going to show you that the best friend a mummer can have is an honest manager. I shall pay your salaries, as I promised, before we part this afternoon ; we will shake hands and forget this affair, and when we meet this evening we shall, I hope, be animated by a cordial feeling of goodwill to do our best for the success of the play and our general prosperity.’

Cooper was moved almost to tears by his

own eloquence and magnanimity, and the company were hardly less touched with the joy of getting their salaries and escaping disaster. When everything was settled up we all shook hands with the manager and then with each other, and it was most delightful to see the smiling content in those faces which had hardly mustered a grin amongst them for the past fortnight. Everyone had a joke to cut. But the best of the fun was, when we all trooped out by the stage-door, to see the sudden embarrassment that overcame the turncoats as they perceived Miss Cooper sailing down the street to meet them. Brewster looked at the clock over the silversmith's, and bolted off the other way as if he had suddenly remembered an engagement; another sneaked into a public-house, but the majority stuck together in a body and passed their late ally as if they had never in their lives seen her before. It was hard on Alice Cooper, after

waiting in the street so long to meet them ; but it was no more than she deserved.

Mr. Sherridan went home with us to tea. There was but little time to spare ; it was now nearly five, and we were to be at the theatre again by half-past six. We were in a flutter of excitement already. Every five minutes Kitty was looking at her watch.

‘ I wonder how Cooper contrived to raise the wind just in the nick of time ? ’ said Mr. Sherridan.

Kitty, behind his chair, looked at me, knitting her eyebrows and pursing up her lips.

‘ Oh ! ’ said I, ‘ he told me he needed only fifty pounds to make up his deficiency, and it was certain he would not lose his reputation and the chance of recovering all he has lost for a sum like that.’

‘ I should think not ! ’ Kitty exclaimed, and then, taking up the brown-papered parcel, which in my excitement I had laid

quite carelessly on the chiffonier, she said :
' What's this, uncle ?'

' My dear, you must not touch that,' said I : ' a friend gave it to me to take care of.' And for fear of accidents I took it up at once into my bedroom and locked the door before I came down, with a fervent prayer that I might have to give the box and its contents to my dear niece before another day passed.

It had been heavy and close all day ; while we were at tea a peal of thunder made the windows rattle, and the next minute the rain began to splash down on the pavement outside, making great discs the size of a penny-piece. At another time we might have taken this as an evil augury, we being rather superstitious in the profession ; but now we hailed it as a capital good sign, knowing that it would drive the throng of people into the theatre. In five minutes there was a regular downpour ; everyone

was running for shelter. Yes, after weeks and weeks of phenomenally fine weather the rain had come. I felt as if I could stand out in the road and get wet through. We were certain now that the luck had turned.

At six o'clock Mr. Sherridan went out to fetch a fly, for Kitty had her three new dresses to take to the theatre, and it was still raining heavily. I thought he would never succeed in getting one, but Kitty was more confident.

‘He would bring me a carriage if he had to take the driver’s place,’ she said. And sure enough in ten minutes he came back in the hotel omnibus, ‘the smallest trap he could find,’ and off we went to the theatre with Kitty and her precious dresses.

‘Why, they’re waiting at the doors already!’ Kitty exclaimed as we passed the front of the house. So they were—quite a couple of dozen, but whether they were

there to get out of the rain or into the theatre we did not think it necessary to discuss.

However, there was no doubt about it at seven o'clock, when the doors were opened. The crowd then stood *in* the rain right out across the pavement. Oh, it was pleasant to stand in the middle of the street and look over the pushing and driving crowd! Cooper, in his best dress-suit, standing on the other side of the pay place, was frantically exhorting the throng not to crush. There were ladies in the crowd, and one was going into hysterics. Oh, it was a long time since he had experienced such a delightful ten minutes!

I couldn't stand it, but I couldn't keep away, either. I was obliged to go on the stage and peep through the curtain at the audience streaming into the house. There they were scrambling over the backs of the pit-seats, rushing along the dress-circle to

get in the middle, the attendants losing their heads and sending everyone to the wrong side of the stalls, and a fight taking place in the gallery amidst such shouting and whistling and screaming as ordinarily one only hears on Boxing Night at a pantomime house. While I was standing there Cooper rushed past calling for the property man to write a bill—‘Pit and Circle Full.’ You would have thought his life depended on getting that bill out. When I went into the orchestra at 7.30 I could not see a single gap anywhere. Every seat was taken—although Cooper, five minutes before the doors opened, had removed the lines of demarcation and turned four rows of half-crown pit-stalls into five-shilling orchestras, and transformed the whole of the three-shilling balcony into four-and-six fauteuils. Mr. Sherridan had given up his box to the press, and there were a good many representatives of the

sporting and dramatic papers crowded in there ; but in justice to those of the better sort, I must say that they paid for their stalls like gentlemen.

Up in the gallery, in the middle of the front row, there was one head that I recognised—a head with close-cropped gray hair : Kitty's father had taken the best place ; he must have waited at the doors a long while. The roughs up there were still scuffling, shouting, and whistling about him, but he took no notice of them. He had come there to see his daughter, and seemed to have no regard for anything else.

‘ Poor Bob,’ I said to myself, ‘ with all your faults you have a good and pure affection for Kitty. You are more to be pitied than blamed, for surely if calamity had not overthrown your reason you would never have given way to intemperance, or fallen under the influence of evil-doers. And but for that you might now have been

as well off as I, and your heart would be gladdened by the responsive love of an affectionate child, instead of living desolate and wretched, an outcast and a vagabond ?

I thought no more about him then, for I had my own business to attend to, and I was anxious that my part of the performance should be up to the mark. I opened my score, turned the corners of the leaves, assured myself that all my men were in their places, and then fixed my eye on the prompt side of the curtain. At length it was drawn aside, Cooper nodded to me, I raised my baton, gave three taps with my foot, looking to the right and left, and then off we went. Nothing could have gone better, but the delicacy of my *andante* movement was quite lost on the audience because of the row in the gallery ; however, the roughs quieted down in the *fortissimo*, and my finale was followed by a round of applause. Then the prompt-bell struck

and the curtain ran up on the first act of the comedy.

There is no doubt about it : 'The Bluestocking' was a genuine success, attained by legitimate and praiseworthy means. The dialogue was smart and brisk, bristling with good points ; the business was neat and full of ludicrous conceits ; the situations were laughable in the extreme, and the serious interest running through the plot, never once slackening, increased with each scene, and culminated only at the very end of the last act. And it was acted most admirably. Every line was taken up smartly ; not a point was missed. There was not one hitch from beginning to end. Kitty of course took the first honours, and she deserved them. Throwing herself heart and soul into her part, she played with the freshness and vigour of a young actress, but with the perfect self-control which only comes with a full knowledge of stagecraft and a sound

knowledge of the art. Whenever she came upon the stage a murmur of expectancy ran through the house. There seemed to be a general feeling that something good was coming, and not once was this expectation at fault. There was a great deal of her own character in the naïveté and archness she threw into her part, and this delightful manner, combined with her bright, intelligent and beautiful little face, her lithe, young figure and graceful bearing, made her simply bewitching.

The rest of the company did their very best, and very well they played, too, worked up as they were by their own good-humour and the ready appreciation of the audience. They were on the titter from beginning to end, their mirth breaking out now and then into long and loud peals of laughter. Their satisfaction and delight found expression at the end of each act in such a thunder of applause that the curtain had to

be raised on the tableau ; and not content with that, they thundered again until all the actors had crossed the stage before the curtain. It was good to hear such unanimous applause, for doubtless a good many had been drawn to the theatre by the vulgar bills in anticipation of something very different. But I think these people felt pleased with themselves in finding their minds capable of diversion by seemly wit and honest fun. As for me, though I knew every word of the play by heart, I never laughed so heartily at a performance in all my life.

Then when the curtain had fallen on the last act, and all the actors had crossed the stage hand in hand, there rose from the press-box and different parts of the house a cry for the author, and this being taken up by the rest of the audience, who couldn't have enough of the play, the whole house rang with shouts of ' Author, author ! ' I

cried out with the rest, clapping my hands, all my band following the example. The curtain was again drawn aside, and Cooper, with his wig in one hand, led on Mr. Sherridan with the other. On the opposite side the curtain was drawn aside, and the rest of the company came on to the stage to join in applauding their friend the author. That was more to Mr. Sherridan than all the plaudits of the audience. He crossed over, and, taking Kitty's hand, led her back to where he had left Cooper, and, standing between them, he bowed his acknowledgments to the house and retired, bowing again to Kitty as she passed before him.

I glanced up at the gallery. Kitty's father was standing in his place, almost alone now, turning his hat idly in his hands, still looking down on the stage. He was not looking at me; he seemed lost in reverie. Maybe he was looking back through a score of years and seeing again

his lost wife, then as radiant with youthful beauty and happiness as Kitty was now. When I turned to dive under the stage, and looked up again, Kitty's father was making his way slowly round the front of the gallery, his hat pulled down over his eyes, but his face still turned downward towards the empty stage.

The house was empty now. There was no one left in it but the two attendants silently drawing the long, shroud-like sheets over the front of the balcony. To me there was something sepulchral and depressing in the stillness and vacancy ; still more dismal and cheerless must it have seemed to that forlorn and friendless man.

CHAPTER X.

A MAN OF HIS WORD.

THE scene on the other side of the curtain, when I came up on the stage from the cellar, presented a striking contrast. The set was not yet struck; the sky and border lights were still aflame. They were all on the stage—actors and actresses, in their character costumes, with the paint on their faces—clustered together shaking hands with the successful author, laughing and joking amongst themselves, and everyone in the highest spirits and best humour possible. A boy came on the stage with a basket of real champagne, followed by another with a

dozen of champagne-glasses ; and the sight of this refreshment gave a fresh fillip to the general gaiety. Cooper let us know that he could be generous when he was able to afford it. The corks popped one after another, the wine frothed in the glasses, and when we were charged Cooper made another little speech, and we all drank long life and prosperity to Mr. Sherridan. Then he replied in a few words, which I cannot recall to mind, but I know that they were bright and sparkling and generous like the champagne that drove them out of my memory. To tell the truth, we were all prodigiously excited, and I not much less than the rest of the company, for though the success of 'The Blue-stocking,' as a play, had not that intoxicating effect upon me which it naturally exercised upon those whose efforts had achieved this triumphant result, I had an additional source of exhilaration in the conviction that my dear Kitty's happiness

was now assured. And what greater happiness could I wish her than to be united for life to a young man of a warm and generous disposition, bright intellect, honest and healthy, in mind and body, and a gentleman by birth? With all the resources of art at hand, there was not a man on the stage who could make a face or figure so captivating or assume a character so lovable as his.

As he concluded his reply, he turned to Kitty, who stood near, and the radiant happiness in their faces when their eyes met and lingered led me to believe that he had already found time to tell her that he loved her, and won her consent to be his wife. That was not my opinion only. Cooper, coming to refill my glass, said in a sly undertone :

‘ We owe you a lot, Holderness, but you’ve done a good thing for yourself at the same time. It’s a case over there ’—with a wink and a twitch of the elbow towards Kitty and

Mr. Sherridan ; 'it's a hundred to one that Sherridan's popped the question already.'

I laughed, and said I hoped he might find someone more disposed to take his bet than I was. And then our conversation turned to business. All were talking about the performance, each finding some point of interest to discuss and laugh over, and I believe we should have stayed there an hour engaged on the same topic, if the gas-man, seeing no prospect of getting a glass of champagne for himself, had not cut off the border lights, and the carpenters, following his lead, had not come forward to clear the stage. That obliged us to rise from the seats we had taken and think of getting home. The ladies went off to their dressing-rooms ; Cooper, hooking his arm in Mr. Sherridan's, led him away, and in a few minutes of all that mirthful company I was the only one left on the stage.

I knew it would be a good half-hour

before Kitty came down, so I went out to smoke a quiet pipe in the fresh air.

The stage entrance was quite blocked by a group of gentlemen in light racing overcoats, amongst whom I recognised Mr. Norris, the London manager, and Mr. Fenton, the playwright and dramatic critic. They were asking the doorkeeper if Mr. Sherridan and Mr. Cooper were in the house.

‘Bravo!’ said I to myself, as I worked my way past them into the street. ‘This is good business. These gentlemen have seen the play and spotted a good thing, as they say. Norris is not the man to let a fine play go dragging about the country when he knows it will fill a London house for three or four hundred nights. In a little time Kitty’s husband will be famous and earning his thousands a year, like other successful dramatists.’

In these and such-like reflections I indulged my imagination, slowly pacing the

pavement for about a hundred yards on each side of the stage-door, till, turning on my heel for the twentieth time maybe, I perceived the same company of gentlemen in light coats streaming out of the theatre, with Mr. Sherridan and Mr. Cooper. They came on laughing and talking loudly. Mr. Sherridan, who led with Mr. Norris, was so deeply engaged in conversation that he did not notice me when we passed ; but Cooper, who brought up the rear, recognised me, and, stopping, said :

‘ Come along, Holderness ; we’re going to finish up at the Albion.’

I declined, telling him that I was going home with Kitty.

‘ Take her home, and then come on,’ said he with a wave of his hand, as he rejoined his companion.

‘ A pretty return to the poor girl for all her devotion,’ thought I ; ‘ she works night and day with heart and soul—risks the loss

of all her little earnings for the success of the play. The play succeeds, and, lo! Kitty can be left alone while we go to the Albion and drink more than is good for us. Um! the women may well say we're all alike—selfish!

Certainly my reflections had taken a bitter turn all of a sudden. The fact is, I felt sore to think that Mr. Sherridan should 'wind up' at the Albion instead of with us. Up to that moment I was sure that he had made an offer to Kitty; but now I had strong doubts on the subject, and I went so far, even, as to question whether he intended to keep the promise he had made. A man's views change so greatly when prosperity takes the place of adversity.

Presently Kitty came to the stage-door, and peeped first to the right and then to the left.

'Alone!' she said in a tone of surprise when I went to her.

‘Yes, my dear,’ said I. ‘Mr. Sherridan has gone on with his friends, to wind up at the Albion.’

She took my arm without a word, and we walked homewards in silence for some time. Then, feeling that I ought to defend Mr. Sherridan, I told her that Mr. Norris was of the party, and suggested the possibility of their having some matter of business to discuss.

‘And you know, my dear,’ said I, in conclusion, ‘business must not be neglected.’

‘Nor friends either,’ she retorted sharply. I may have remarked already that Kitty had a high spirit. ‘Business!’ she continued indignantly; ‘that is a man’s excuse for any act that betrays a want of feeling.’

‘After all, we did not tell him that we expected him to take supper with us.’

‘That was one of those things that a friend does not need telling. He must have known

that we should like to talk it all over quietly by ourselves.'

'True,' said I, the feeling of exasperation rising again in my breast; 'and to leave us like this, without even saying good-night, without leaving a message to say he was sorry he had to go to the Albion, was confoundedly unhandsome, especially considering what we have done for him and his play.'

'You haven't breathed a word about that money to him, have you, uncle?'

'Not a syllable.'

'Then how should he know he is under any obligation at all to us? What we have done has been quite as much in our own interests as his. If the play had not been produced we should both be out of engagement. It's only natural that a man should wish now and then to mix with men and exchange ideas upon different things. I should, if I were a man.'

'Well, my dear,' said I testily, 'I shouldn't

have said a word about it, only I thought you felt yourself slighted.'

'Why on earth should I feel slighted? I've no claim upon Mr. Sherridan. We are both free to do exactly as we please.'

In this way we disputed all the way to our lodgings, both under a feeling of irritation and disappointment, and each in turn taking up the cudgels for Mr. Sherridan and against him. Neither of us quite knew what we were driving at, but one thing was perfectly clear to me: Mr. Sherridan had made no offer of marriage to Kitty.

In our sitting-room we found the supper laid out for three, with the lobster salad at one end, a gooseberry pie at the other, and a fine piece of roast beef in the middle. Kitty and I had made preparation for this feast in the morning, and I own that the overthrow of all our pleasant anticipations, and the reflection that we should have that joint of beef before us for the whole of the

week, completely took away the appetite which the sight of these good things created. I hung up my hat on the peg behind the door with a heavy heart, and Kitty, sitting down, gazed absently at the floor as she slowly drew off her gloves. Seating myself at the table, I was about to say something disagreeable, feeling unconscionably irritable, when by the light of the lamp that fell on her face I saw a bright tear stealing down Kitty's cheek. That melted me at once, for surely there is nothing in the world so touching as the sight of a young girl's tears, and, my better feelings awaking, I thanked God in my heart that I had not let slip a word or hint about Mr. Sherridan's avowed intention to make her his wife if his fortune turned. For, in addition to the disappointment of all the hopes she might have built upon that possibility, what a blow would it have been to her faith in the loyalty of mankind to perceive that he whom she had

set up as the very soul of honour and generosity could abandon his purpose and forsake her when she ceased to be necessary to his welfare.

‘Why, Kitty dear,’ said I, ‘what’s this? The reaction is too much for you, eh?’

‘No, no; it isn’t that,’ she faltered, choking down her grief and wiping the tears from her eyes.

‘Then, what is it?’ I asked, changing my seat, and slipping my arm round her waist. ‘Come, tell me all about it.’

She nestled her face in my shoulder with a little hysterical laugh, and squeezing my hand, grateful for sympathy, replied in broken sentences, with a little gulp now and then to repress a rising sob :

‘It isn’t reaction, uncle. Excitement never upsets me, you know. It’s the loss of a friend. That’s the real trouble.’

‘Why, dear,’ said I, trying to put the best face on it, ‘you take this too seriously.

It may be a little thoughtless of Mr. Sherri-dan to leave us like this to-night, but you must not think he has abandoned us for good all because of that.'

· Oh, no, no, no ! That's only a trifling disappointment—not the real cause at all. We shall forget all about that by to-morrow, when he comes to bid us good-bye. But it is the thought that we shall see him no more after that, or at most from time to time like an ordinary acquaintance. He has been so much more than that to us. Every day we have been together, and it has seemed so much a part of our life that we have set hardly any store by it, have we ? But it comes home to us now that we don't see him here, don't hear his voice, and feel that there is a great gap. It's no more than we might have expected. It was the play that threw us together—we talked of nothing else hardly, did we ? And now the play is produced, there is no reason

for his staying with us—he could not, could he? It's my own fault.' Here the tears flowed again, in spite of herself. 'I should have prepared myself for this, knowing it must come. But instead of that, when the thought came, I have set it out of my mind because it was unpleasant. And now it comes suddenly like a death, and one is forced to realize that a dear friend is gone and cannot be with us any more. And there is no one else to take his place—no one in all the world, I think, is like him. Don't think me ungrateful, dear. I know I have you. But I can't help it—I have been so happy. Let me cry. It will do me good.'

I said what I could to comfort the poor child, and suffered her to weep. But in the midst of her crying she suddenly raised her head, and lifted her hand as she sat with wide-open eyes listening.

'It's he,' she cried, starting to her feet

just as I caught the sound of a brisk, firm step coming down the street. 'He mustn't see that I've been crying;' and then she darted upstairs just as Mr. Sherridan's well-known knock sounded at the door.

'A thousand apologies,' he said, panting for breath, as I opened the door. 'I left the theatre with Norris, expecting to get back again before you were ready to go. Norris had an offer to make for the play, but a matter of more serious importance detained me at the hotel. A strange thing has happened. I will tell you all about it to-morrow.' Then, as we entered the sitting-room and he found it empty, he asked in a tone of surprise, 'Where's Kitty?'

'Here,' she replied, from the top of the stairs, and the next moment she joined us, having in that brief space found time to take off her jacket and hat and bathe her face. Pretending to turn up the wick of the lamp, I managed to lower the shade.

‘ You have come to take supper with us after all,’ she said, giving her hand. It seemed quite natural that they should shake hands, although they had parted so recently.

‘ Yes, but I did not come for the supper, Kitty, tempting as it is,’ he replied, still holding her hand. ‘ As your uncle knows, something much more vital is in my mind, and the question must be solved before I leave go of this little hand. For whether I sit down to that table with a brave appetite, or leave it with no desire ever to eat again, depends upon your answer. Till this night it has been doubtful whether I should sink or swim ; but Norris has made me an offer for the play which settles that doubt. I can afford to break silence now, Kitty, and the question of all questions is, will you be my wife and share the fortune you have helped me to win ?’

She looked at him in bewilderment for a moment, and then, with a cry of joy, she

slid her arm round his neck and laid her head on his breast, lifting her face to his. And at this point I thought it advisable to slip out of the room.

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

I WALKED up and down the little entrance passage for some time, quite content to wait there till I was wanted. When one is happy, a lodging-house passage is just as good as a marble hall to walk in, and I had every reason to be happy, albeit my conscience reproached me for the hasty judgment I had passed on Mr. Sherridan and the bitter reflections I had entertained with regard to him; but it was a pleasure even to know that I had been in error, and to find him, after all, not a whit less loyal and lovable than I had formerly believed him to

be. At length the young lovers, discovering that I was not in the room, opened the door, and, with a laugh to find me standing outside in the dark passage, Jack (for Mr. Sherridan had no other name in our thought from that night) told me I might come in now. I shook hands heartily with him, and, taking my dear Kitty in my arms, congratulated them both as well as I could in such simple words as flowed out of my joyful heart. Then we sat down to supper, and by the time we had finished the only fear in my mind with regard to the cold beef was that there might not be enough to put on the table the next day.

When the moment came to separate, and Jack had said good-night to us both at least half a dozen times, he found something fresh to tell me before the final adieu.

‘I may not turn up before twelve or one o’clock to-morrow,’ said he; ‘it may be even

later. As I told you, I heard something at the Albion to-night of a nature so serious that I do not care to talk about it until I am better informed. I shall occupy myself in getting at the truth of it to-morrow morning, and you shall know all when we meet again.'

When the door was at length closed on him, and I looked at my watch, I found to our surprise that it was past three o'clock ; but it was a good hour later before Kitty consented to go to bed.

'To think that I am to be his wife !' she exclaimed, hugging me round the neck ; ' I, Kitty Yorke, to be Mrs. Sherridan !'

Then, seating herself on my knee, she made me tell her all that I had known about Jack's intentions. That involved my narrating all that had passed between us on the day when he revealed his position and his relations with the Vicar of St. Botolph's.

‘And why didn’t you tell me all this when you saw I was in grief at the thought of his going away?’ she asked.

‘Why, as he had not made you the offer, and had gone off, as we supposed, to wind up at the Albion——’ I began.

‘Surely that was no reason for keeping the matter secret!’ she exclaimed, interrupting me. ‘How could he make me an offer when the moment the curtain fell everyone was crowding round us? You knew that the play was a success, and you *couldn’t* have thought that Jack would be false. That wasn’t like you, uncle, to be so unkind to me or so unjust to him.’

‘Well, my dear,’ said I, suddenly be-
thinking myself of her father’s gift; ‘I’ll admit myself in the wrong, and make you the best amends I can think of. Wait a moment.’

I ran upstairs and fetched the sandal-wood box from my room.

‘There, Kitty,’ said I, putting the box in her hands, ‘you will find enough in that to pay for your wedding outfit.’

‘What a lovely box!’ she said, and then, pressing the silver boss at my direction, she was lost in astonishment to find a bundle of bank-notes inside. She examined them in silence, and then, turning to me in perplexity, said :

‘Where *did* you get all this money from? Yesterday we could not make up a quarter of this sum.’

‘My dear,’ I replied with some hesitation, ‘the money is not mine. It is a present to you from one who loved your mother very dearly. That is all I may tell you; and I must ask you to question me no further on the subject.’

She looked at the box and its contents again in silent bewilderment, and I could see she was burning with curiosity to know more about this strange present and its giver; but

she refrained from questioning me, and only said with a little sigh :

‘ It’s dreadful to have a mystery that you may not try to puzzle out ; however, I won’t bother you about it. It’s a lovely present, and I’m very much obliged to whoever it was that gave it me. You will keep the money for me, uncle. The box will do beautifully for my gloves.’

I took charge of the bundle of notes, and she carried the box up to her room, where I felt pretty certain it soon ceased to occupy her thoughts, having that to think about which was far more precious than a sandal-wood box, though it had been crammed full of bank-notes. It was ten o’clock when I got down the next morning.

Kitty had not yet risen, and I sat down to breakfast alone, knowing that she would not make her appearance for another hour, as Jack had told us not to expect him before twelve or one. But just as I was

cracking an egg there came a knock at the door which I knew must be Jack's. A man's character is generally displayed by his manner of knocking at a door. Jack's was always firm and bold ; but this morning the knocker fell in a regular joyful peal. I was surprised, and I guess Kitty was also, and not a little mortified into the bargain to be caught napping at this hour by her lover. In he came as I opened the door, fresh, bright, and cheerful as the morning, with a great bundle of newspapers under his arm.

‘Splendid notices!’ said he, wringing my hand. ‘Columns of praise, and an exhaustive stream of flattering adjectives for Kitty! Where is she?’

‘Not up yet. We didn't turn in till nearly five.’

‘I ought to have thought of that. Poor girl! she must be tired out. Confounded thoughtless of me to knock like that!’

A hurried pattering of feet over the sitting-room ceiling gave me reason to say that I was sure she would be greatly disappointed if he had knocked less loudly and to promise that she would be down shortly. 'Now let me see the notices,' said I. He unfolded the papers and put them before me, his face glowing with delight as he pointed out the unstinted praise bestowed on Kitty's performance. But what pleased me almost as much was to find that one and all of the critics wrote with enthusiastic admiration of the play itself, describing it as brilliant, witty, masterly, and refined. The local prints all referred to the fact that the author was closely related to the highly respected Vicar of St. Botolph's, observing that there was not one line in the comedy which the most rigorous moralist could take exception to, or a single phrase which a parent might wish to blot out from the work of his son.

‘Come,’ said I, pointing out one of these passages to Jack, ‘your grandfather will be glad to read this. Who knows but that your play, instead of still further estranging you from him, may lead to a reconciliation.’

‘Ah,’ he replied, becoming suddenly grave, ‘that opens a subject of a very different kind. I told you last night that I was detained at the Albion by a very serious matter.’

‘Yes, and I remember also your saying that you did not care to talk about it until you were better informed.’

‘Just so. I have been hunting up information since eight o’clock this morning, and I have got all that is to be had at present; that’s why I’m here before the time I expected. I heard last night that my grandfather had disappeared in a most unaccountable manner. You can imagine the reports that would accompany such a

fact. A certain class of persons always jump at the very worst conclusions in the absence of convincing facts. Rumour last night said that my grandfather was murdered.'

'Murdered?' I gasped.

'Of course that is out of the question. I learnt enough in five minutes to see that there was no foundation for a belief of that kind. The old gentleman has been missing since Monday night—that is all which was positively known. In effect that is all I know now. But the negative evidence is tolerably conclusive that he has not been murdered.'

'You have been up to the Vicarage this morning, I suppose?'

'Yes; these are the facts I collected there.' He took out his notebook, in which he had pencilled some memoranda, and, looking at them, continued: 'My grandfather seems to have been a man of peculiar,

perhaps eccentric, habits, as a man living alone for the greater part of his life must be. "Studious, sedentary, silent," he read. "Only one family with whom he was closely intimate, Admiral Strong, The Cedars"—a stone's-throw from the Vicarage. I went there—the Admiral and his daughter away in Ireland, expected home to-morrow. "Three female and one male servant living in the house—cook, housemaids, and gardener-coachman—all old servants. Rev. Crawley Shepherd also an inhabitant of the Vicarage, acting as curate, secretary, and general factotum seemingly." He was the last person of the household who saw the Vicar. Servants went to bed at ten, Shepherd went up at half-past. Before going went into the library to see if my grandfather "had any further requirements of his services that night." The Vicar replied in the negative. He was then sitting by the table with a book and his reading-lamp. When the

housemaid came into the room the next morning—yesterday, Tuesday—she was surprised to find the French windows giving on the lawn open. Later on it was discovered that my grandfather was not in the house. Further search proved that he was not in the neighbourhood, and had not been seen by any of his parishioners or the servants at The Cedars, where at first it was thought he might have gone. There was no sign of the house having been broken into. Doors and windows were all secured, except the library window, and that had been opened from the inside. He might have opened that for air, but there was nothing to show that violence had been committed in the room. The police suspected that some of the roughs attending the races were concerned in the affair; but the Vicar's watch lay on the table, where he was in the habit of placing it when he read, and nothing apparently had been taken from the house.

That disposes of the idea that thieves had made away with the Vicar. He has no personal enemies, so one cannot impute vengeance as a motive for secret crime. So I think we may set the notion of murder completely aside.'

'That's a great thing,' said I. 'If the Vicar was of an eccentric character, it is quite possible that he has simply gone away for a few days, not thinking that his absence could cause alarm.'

'Or not caring greatly, his one friend, Admiral Strong, being away. I should think, from what I observed, that he held the Rev. Crawley in considerable contempt, and was fairly indifferent to his feelings. An odd sort of a prig that,' he said with a jerk of his head and a smile, 'the perfect type of a fussy fool.'

'Oh, *you* think he is a fool?'

'Can't help thinking so.'

'Kitty thought him something worse.'

‘Ah, well, I dare say she is right. Women are quicker and truer of perception than we.’

‘Well, you think your grandfather has simply gone away for a few days?’

‘M—yes,’ he replied reflectively, tapping his knuckles with the notebook. ‘There was a sheet of paper on his desk on which he had begun to write a letter; the date under the embossed address, and the words ‘Dear Cunningham,’ were written—that’s all. Cunningham, I find, is his solicitor—Lincoln’s Inn. It seemed to me that he broke off there, with the sudden resolution to go to London and consult his solicitor personally instead of by letter. It is reasonable to suppose that, being greatly vexed by the production of my play, he took this course with the view of getting away from the place and shaking off the worry.’

‘Perhaps Mr. Cunningham may give you some information.’

‘No. He has already been telegraphed to, and his reply is that he has neither seen my grandfather nor heard from him.’

‘Oh, well! I don’t think you have any cause for alarm,’ said I, seeing that Jack still looked grave.

His expression did not lighten, and he replied in the same dubious tone as before :

‘M—no. Still, there is one fact which makes me a little anxious. My grandfather’s heart is weak. He is subject to syncope, and without proper treatment an attack of that kind may be fatal. Now, if he had simply strolled in the night through the garden out into the road anywhere, and was seized with one of these fainting fits——’

‘Why, then,’ I interrupted, ‘his body would certainly have been found before now, the town and all the neighbourhood being thronged with visitors.’

‘True. Well,’ he said, rising briskly and

dismissing the subject as we heard Kitty's foot on the stairs, 'we shall see.'

It rained again that day, and at night the theatre was crammed in every part—indeed, we played to overflowing houses the whole week, and the days flew away with astonishing swiftness. We had all such cause for happiness that we treated the mysterious disappearance of Jack's grandfather more lightly than otherwise we might. Moreover, our apprehensions were greatly allayed by the view Admiral Strong took of the affair. But the interview with this gentleman was of such a remarkable character that I think I must give it a place in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XII.

STIRRING INCIDENTS.

It was on Friday morning that I agreed to walk up to the Vicarage with Jack to see if there were any tidings of the Vicar. On reaching the top of the hill he pointed out a large old-fashioned red-brick house, standing back from the road and flanked by a couple of cedars, and told me that it was Admiral Strong's residence.

‘By the way,’ he added, ‘we may as well see if the Admiral has come back,’ and with that he pulled the bell-handle that hung by the side of the wrought-iron gates.

Jack was not light-handed, and the loud,

sonorous peal that answered to his tug might have been heard a quarter of a mile off. It scared me.

‘Jolly old place,’ said Jack, looking up the close-trimmed box avenue that led to the house with the greatest unconcern.

At that moment an old man issued from a side alley, and, seeing us at the gate, came down the path with a menacing swing which was not the less forbidding because he carried an open pruning-knife in his hand. He was a short and particularly stout man, in a light alpaca coat and a straw hat, with a full florid shaven face, a pair of small blue eyes overhung with thick white eyebrows and a low-growing forelock of silver-white hair curling out from the brim of his hat, which was stuck on the back of his head. His eyebrows were knitted close together, and his lips were so pursed up with firm determination that his mouth was scarcely distinguishable. Whether he was a gardener

or the Admiral himself I could not decide, but certainly he walked with a most seaman-like gait, planting his feet well apart at each step as if on the look-out for a lurch. I had barely noticed these particulars, when I caught sight of a young lady, who came also from the alley, with a bunch of roses in her hand, which probably the old man had been cutting for her with that formidable knife. She was a fine, tall young woman, dressed in white, fair, with bright sunny hair plaited negligently in a tail that hung coquettishly over her shoulders. I could not well distinguish her features at that distance, but she looked amazingly pretty, I thought. After regarding us for a moment, she seated herself on a stone bench in a recess of the box hedge and occupied herself in arranging her flowers, with a view, I expect, to hearing who we were and what our business was.

‘Has Admiral Strong returned?’ asked

Jack as soon as the old gentleman was within hail.

‘Yes, he has : I’m Admiral Strong,’ answered the sturdy old fellow, planting himself before us with his legs astride, as if he had to defend the gates with his life. He was, we found later, a little hard of hearing, which accounted for his speaking to us in a loud voice, as though we were deaf. ‘I’m Admiral Strong, and who the devil are you?’

‘I am John Sherridan,’ replied Jack, who was much more amused with this odd reception than I was.

‘Oh, indeed, Jack Sherridan, eh?—the dutiful grandson who prefers the buskin to the cassock, and writes plays because his conscience won’t permit him to compose sermons. You’re the scrupulous young gentleman who’s put this modest town to the blush with a display of blue stockings on all the hoardings, are you?’ There was a

twinkle in the Admiral's little blue eye which I hardly knew whether to attribute to fury or a sense of humour.

‘For present purposes,’ replied Jack airily, ‘it may be sufficient to admit that I am your old friend’s grandson.’

‘Well, I don’t like you any better for that. And who the deuce are you?’ he asked, turning suddenly on me, adding, as he looked me up and down : ‘*You* look more like a thief than a horse.’

This last observation took my breath away so completely that I was unable to reply to his question ; but Jack, who never lost his self-command, came to my aid.

‘Permit me to introduce my friend Mr. Holderness,’ he said.

‘Ah, I know something about you, too, Mr. Holderness,’ said the Admiral. ‘There’s a Christian young man in this neighbourhood whose searching in the path of truth has made him acquainted with a fact not

very creditable to your character. It seems that you are completing the destruction of my old friend's grandson by tacking him on to your niece—a young person who dances on the stage to the jigging of your fiddle amidships.'

Before I could find a word to reply to this monstrous charge, he turned to Jack and asked what we had come there for—the pair of us.

'I came in the hope that you might throw some light on my grandfather's disappearance.'

'In plain English, you want to know whether in my opinion the Vicar has been murdered or not.'

'That is the sole object of this call.'

'An honest confession, at any rate, and you shall have the same reply I gave to Mr. Crawley Shepherd, who is likewise sniffing about for a legacy. It's my firm belief that the Vicar is now alive, as hale and

hearty as I am, and there's not an old shoe in the Vicarage that any one of you will step into for a dozen years to come.'

'I am delighted to hear you say so,' said Jack.

'Well, your cheerful look belies you, but I suppose a man who can write a play can play a part, at a pinch. However, you won't get much out of this, unless it be the stuff for a farce, which you might call "Blighted Expectations."'

'Why, sir,' replied Jack with perfect good temper, 'the pleasantest expectation I have is that my grandfather will return to Chester as soon as I quit it. For I can only account for his disappearance by assuming that my presence here had made Chester unendurable to him.'

'You needn't take all the credit for that, neither. What with roughs and sharpers, we've got vagabonds enough of one sort and another, without you, to make Chester at

race time abominable to a sober old parson. No matter ; blacklegs and blue-stockings, out you all go on Saturday night, and I wager my old friend will return to his pulpit on Sunday. There'd have been no question about it, look you,' he added, with a little less acerbity, 'but for the mischievous meddling of your friend, Mr. Crawley, up at the Vicarage, confound him ! But I'll check these sensational rumours ; and to prove my contempt for them, hang me ! if I don't show myself at the theatre to-night, and sit out this play of yours.'

'I shall be happy to give you a box,' said Jack.

'No,' replied the Admiral, opening the gate. 'Keep your orders for the shopkeepers who stick your bills in their windows. Thank God, I can afford to pay for an evening's amusement when I want it. But,' he added, stepping forward and holding out his hand, 'you may give us your fist, for

I see you're one of the right sort. Damme ! if I'd ever trust the finest vessel afloat, before I'd seen how she weathered a bit of a spanking sea. As for you, Mr. Chatty'—I had not spoken a single word in the whole interview—said he, turning to me, after shaking Jack's hand heartily, but without deigning to offer me the same civility, 'I expect you're like your fiddle—scrape you the right way, and something may be got out of you ; but a punch in the back would knock all the tune out of you.'

'A nice, pleasant-spoken old gentleman,' said Jack, with a laugh, when we left him. I think he had found something to like in the Admiral from the very first ; but to my mind he was the rudest and most offensive brute I had ever met.

He came to the theatre, as he had promised, in the evening, with the young lady we had seen in the box walk. She was

dressed in the very height of fashion, and was strikingly handsome. Whether it was to attract observation, or whether the play really tickled his sense of humour to an extraordinary degree, I cannot say; but certainly the Admiral laughed louder and longer than anyone in the house, and, with his red face and shining white curls, was as noticeable amongst the audience as his daughter.

One advantage we undoubtedly gained by this interview. Our fears with regard to the Vicar were completely allayed; for surely if anyone could form a just conclusion with regard to his disappearance, it was this old friend, who knew his peculiarities so thoroughly. So on Sunday we went on to Birmingham, feeling tolerably confident that we should soon hear from the Admiral, to whom Jack had sent his future address, that the Vicar had returned to his flock; but on Monday morning Jack

came to our new lodgings with a grave face, and showed us a telegram he had just received from Chester.

‘Come at once. Bad news.—STRONG,’ we read—Kitty and I.

‘There’s a train in half an hour,’ said Jack, looking at his watch.

Kitty ran upstairs for her hat, saying she would go to the station with him.

‘If I can get away I shall come back to-night to tell you all about it,’ said Jack. ‘I fear from this that my grandfather has been found—dead.’

I stood at the door, following Kitty and Jack with my eyes until they turned the corner of the street, and was then about to turn and re-enter the house, when a man crossing the road attracted my attention with a cough. I recognised him at the second glance, though the lower part of his face was black with a hairy growth of four or five days, and he wore a black cloth

cap and a suit of greasy corduroy. It was Kitty's father.

‘Where are they off to?’ he asked, with a jerk of the head towards the end of the street.

‘The railway-station,’ I answered. ‘What are you doing here, Bob?’

‘I want to speak to you. Let's go in.’

He brushed past me and entered the house quickly, as if he feared observation. Following him, I noticed that he carried under his arm a long bundle in a coloured handkerchief.

‘Is it all right, Dick?’ he asked in a tone of anxiety as I closed the parlour door.

‘You should know that better than I,’ I answered, thinking by his manner that he wanted to know if he was out of danger there. ‘If you've done any wrong——’

He interrupted me with an impatient movement of his head as he set the bundle on the table.

‘I don’t mean that,’ said he. ‘I can take care of myself. It’s Kitty I want to know about. Has Mr. Sherridan kept his word—is he going to marry her?’

‘Yes, he kept his word, and Kitty has consented to be his wife.’

‘Thank God!’ he exclaimed. ‘When will they be back?’

‘Mr. Sherridan is not likely to return before night; he has gone to Chester.’

‘Chester?’ in a sharp tone of interrogation.

‘Yes, something has happened to his grandfather. He received a telegram just now.’

‘Has Kitty gone with him?’

‘Only as far as the railway-station to see him off. She must not find you here, Bob.’

‘Oh, I’ll take care of that. But there’s no time to lose. Have you given her that box?’

‘ Yes, I gave it her the night Mr. Sheridan offered his hand.’

‘ Where is it now ?’

‘ The money she gave me to take care of ?’ I asked.

‘ I don’t want that. It’s the box I’m after. The sandal-wood box — where is that ?’

‘ Upstairs in her room — she keeps her gloves in it.’

‘ Fetch it,’ he said peremptorily, as he hastily began to unknot the handkerchief; and as I hesitated he continued still more sharply : ‘ Fetch it, I tell you. I must have it. By a strange accident I’ve found the man who lost it. I must give it up. Do as I tell you, Dick, for God’s sake ! and don’t lose time.’

His manner frightened me, and filled me with an indefinable misgiving. I went up to Kitty’s room, emptied the box, which stood on the chest of drawers, and took it

down to the parlour. Yorke had opened his bundle and taken from the midst of a few articles of clothing another sandalwood box which at the first glance looked very much like the one I held in my hand. But when he held them side by side to compare them I saw a great difference. The box he had brought was larger and flatter than the other ; it was darker and more used, and lacked the silver ornament and the boss.

‘ It’s the nearest I could find, and it was a stroke of luck to get that,’ he said. ‘ It must do. Put it in the place of this one ; perhaps she will not notice the difference.’

‘ That’s out of the question ; she is sure to notice the difference,’ said I.

‘ I can’t help it,’ he replied, hastily wrapping the original box in a gray shirt. ‘ You must find some excuse. But, mind, not a word about me.’

I felt as if I had been awoke from tranquil

sleep by some unaccountable sound, and stood watching him as he made up his bundle, silent with the dread of some terrible discovery. As he knotted the handkerchief, he said :

‘Go to the window, Dick, and see if the road’s clear.’

I did as he bade me, and told him that the street was empty. Then, as he made for the door with a nod, I put my hand on his arm, and begged him in a faltering voice to tell me what was the matter. He regarded me for a moment in silence, and then, shaking off my hand with a reckless laugh, said :

‘I’ve told you as much as you’re likely to get out of me. An accident has happened, and nothing will come of it now I’ve got the sandal-wood box, if you only hold your tongue about me.’

He opened the street-door, pulled it to after him with a bang, and when I looked

from the window I saw him strolling across the road with the stolid indifference of a labourer out of work. I lost no time in taking the box Yorke had left up to Kitty's room, my fear leading me to expect her return every minute. Then I filled it with the gloves I had laid on the dressing-table, and set it in the place of the box Kitty's father had taken away. The change might pass unnoticed for a time, but it was clear that Kitty must find it out sooner or later, for this second box had no fastening, and did not open with a spring like the other, and I racked my invention in vain for a plausible fiction to account for the substitution. One plan, and only one, recurred to my mind, and that was to leave the discovery to chance, and when Kitty questioned me on the subject to declare entire ignorance with regard to what had happened; but I had never in my life knowingly told my niece an untruth, and the idea of doing so now was

the more unacceptable to me because I felt that I never should have the courage to brazen out the lie. So, finally, I came to the conclusion that it would be better to tell her the truth as far as I dared, and no sooner had I opened the door to her than I said :

‘My dear, I have had a visitor during your absence. The person who gave you a wedding-present through me last week has brought another box in the place of that which contained the notes. As the request was urgent, I could not, of course, refuse to make the exchange ; and you will find the new box on your wardrobe, with the gloves inside it that I took out of the other.’

‘How odd !’ she exclaimed, adding with a little laugh, ‘It is quite a romantic mystery.’ Then, regarding me in silence, with the reflective air of one putting the pieces of a puzzle together, she continued : ‘Someone who loved my mother very dearly

—and it is not you—and he will not make himself known to me.'

After another interval of silence she rose, and, coming to my side, slipped her arms round my neck, and said gently :

'Can't you tell me more, dear? Might I not demand your confidence?'

'Kitty dear,' I said, 'you must not tempt me to tell you more. You know it is not want of faith or affection that makes me silent.'

She kissed me, though I think she was vexed that I did not yield to her wish, and went up to her room without another word. I expected she would at least make some remark with regard to the box when she came down; but the dear girl abstained from saying anything with regard to that or its mysterious origin.

Leaving the orchestra between the acts, I found Jack and Kitty at the foot of the dressing-room stairs, Kitty listening in grave

interest, he speaking in a low tone, with a serious expression on his face.

‘It’s only too true,’ he said, turning to me; ‘my grandfather is dead, and the conclusion is that he was murdered.’

‘Why, sir, how is that?’ I asked.

‘It turns out that he drew a large sum of money from the bank a few days before he disappeared, and now not a note can be found anywhere. The box in which he kept his loose cash and certain valuable papers is gone from his desk—an old silver-mounted sandal-wood box.’

With the flash of a horrible conviction I glanced at Kitty, and found that she was regarding me, and her face was rigid and colourless, like a mask of wax.

CHAPTER XIII.

KITTY LEARNS MY SECRET.

It was not without a vague expectation of seeing Kitty's father that I raised my eyes to the gallery as I re-entered the orchestra ; nevertheless, it gave me a shock to see that he actually was there in the place he usually secured in the middle of the front row. His possession of the sandal-wood box left me no doubt that he was concerned in the robbery, if not in the murder of the Vicar ; his desire to recover the box made it scarcely less certain that the discovery of the crime had been made known to him. And yet, with the possibility of apprehension before him,

he neglected the opportunity of making his escape sure, and lingered at Birmingham, scarcely more than an hour's journey from the place where the police must be actively engaged in searching for the murderer of Mr. Sherridan. Was it, I asked myself, the incomprehensible obtuseness which a criminal so frequently manifests in the hour of greatest danger, or a passionate desire to see his daughter once more before his flight—a desire springing from the terrible forewarning that he should never again look upon that living image of his dead wife?

Jack walked home with us from the theatre, but he left us at the door, saying that he would run round in the morning before leaving for Chester, where the inquest was to be held on his grandfather in the afternoon. The moment we were alone in the sitting-room, Kitty, closing the door, after assuring herself that the people of the

house were not about, said to me in a low, earnest tone :

‘ Uncle, who gave you that box with the notes in it ?’

‘ I have told you as much, my dear, as I may tell you,’ I replied.

‘ You have told me that it was one who loved my mother very dearly—but that is not enough.’

‘ I can only beg you again not to question me further on the subject.’

‘ I cannot be silent. I must know,’ she said, with desperate earnestness. ‘ It is a matter that concerns me too deeply to set aside.’

I sighed, shaking my head, and sat down, closing my lips resolutely.

‘ Perhaps I know who it is,’ she continued, fixing her eyes upon my face. ‘ Is it my father ?’

‘ My child, there are others who loved your mother dearly besides your father.

You have met with dozens who remember her with tenderness.'

'Yes, but not one who loved me for her sake. Tell me,' she entreated, 'is it my father?'

I shifted uneasily in my seat, and, without responding, buried my chin in the palm of my hand, covering my mouth with my fingers, as if to prevent the issue of a lie or the truth.

'If it was not my father who gave you the box,' she pursued, 'you can have no reason for denying it. You can at least tell me all you know about him.'

'Haven't I told you all about him over and over again?' I answered evasively. 'Didn't we go all over the ground again with old Johnson the other day? You have heard the same story from a dozen old friends.'

'Yes. But the story breaks off unfinished. The old friends will tell me of

nothing that happened to him after my mother's death. You come to that point, and then you glance at me and end with a sigh and two little words—"Poor Bob!" I know what that means. When we say "Poor Mary" or "Poor Lizzie," it means that they have done something which we may not talk about openly. I guessed what it meant long ago when friends spoke of my father's kindness and good-fellowship, and then dismissed the subject with "Poor Bob!" and I knew that it was not right for me to know, being a child. But I am a child no longer. It is right that I should know all that concerns my father now, and it would be wrong to shut my eyes to the truth, and go onward in wilful ignorance.'

Touched by the dear girl's earnestness and persuaded by her reasoning, I felt it was impossible to refuse this appeal, though I still hoped to avoid betraying the fact that the box had been given by her father.

‘It is true, Kitty dear,’ said I. ‘Your poor father went wrong after your mother’s death. She died as you have heard, on the stage—her dress catching fire from a foot-light. They were more careless about guards then than we are now. The shock was more than your father’s fortitude could bear. It unmanned him. I believe he was out of his mind for some time. You were too young then to take the place in his heart that had been filled by your mother. There was no longer any home for him. The only hope for him was in forgetfulness, and he sought that in new occupation, in perpetual change of scene, in the acquaintance of men who knew nothing about his past, and could not look at him with pity and compassion. He felt the need of continual excitement. He drank deeply, and step by step he fell lower and lower. He got among a bad set. His incapacity for steady work—for you know he never again

went on the stage after that night—his restlessness, kept him down; the influence of bad companions completed his ruin. We saw him rarely—he avoided us, and maintained a kind of independence; for whatever his necessity may have been he never asked for help. One day I heard that he was in prison. He had met some former acquaintances, and one had spoken slightly of his wife. Your father nearly killed the man, and was duly punished for it. I met him when he came out of gaol, and appealed to him to turn over a new leaf for your sake. “Lend me ten pounds,” said he, “and I will go to America, and you shall never see me again.” I gave him the money, believing that he would keep his word. But the money came back to me in a letter the next week, and it is needless to say that the money was not sent from America. Then I knew that he had fallen again under the old influences, and felt that there was no hope for him.’

I thought I might end there, but Kitty would not suffer that.

‘What did he do after that?’ she asked, with the firmness of one resolved to know the worst.

‘I do not know. I lost sight of him entirely from the day I gave him the money.’

‘When was that?’

‘Ten years ago.’

‘How do you know that he did not go to America, as he promised?’ she asked, quickly seizing the means offered by my halting explanation to defend her father. ‘Are you sure he did not go?’

‘No, my dear.’

‘Then might he not have found some way of getting a passage in the interval, which allowed him to return, before starting, the money you lent?’

‘To be sure, that might be,’ said I hopefully.

‘It is consistent with what you say of his independent character, and of a desire to start on the new path without encumbrance, severing the future entirely from the past.’

‘To be sure, my dear!’ I exclaimed. ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’

She regarded me with silent suspicion for a moment, as if perceiving that I wished to encourage her in a false hope; then she said :

‘When did you see him again?’

‘My dear?’ said I interrogatively, as if I had not heard distinctly.

‘You said just now in effect that he did not keep his promise. You have no proof that he did not go to America, so what you said must refer to the second part of the promise, that you should not see him again.’

Perceiving that I was no match for my keen-witted niece at this cross-examination, I was silent.

‘I am not asking you to break any bond of secrecy you may have made with regard to the box,’ she pursued quickly; ‘I only wish to know when you saw my father again.’

I was compelled to admit that I saw him next on the last night of our pantomime season.

‘What did he say to you then?’

‘He was anxious about your welfare. He knew that man Strathsay was persecuting you. He wished that you should marry and leave the stage.’

‘When did you see him after that?’

‘Last Monday.’

‘That was my father, the man you went down on the racecourse to see about staking my money?’

‘Yes, Kitty. He had told me that if you needed money I was to let him know. I knew that, if the comedy succeeded, Jack would be in a position to make you his wife,

and when I told your father that he promised to let me have the money we needed the next day.'

'And that money he gave you with the box on Tuesday afternoon?'

'Yes; he kept his word.'

Her colourless lips trembled, and suddenly she covered her white face with her hands and burst into tears.

'It was for my sake,' she sobbed.

I went to comfort her if I could, but brusquely checking me, and dashing the tears impatiently from her eyes, she said:

'Where is he now, my father?'

'I cannot tell you—but——'

'But what?'

'He was in the theatre to-night.'

'At the theatre to-night! And the death of Mr. Sherridan is already known. We must find him, uncle, and let him know.'

She started to her feet, as if in her des-

peration she thought it possible to seek him; then she sank down again, faint with the sense of her impotency, as I asked how it was possible for us to find him.

‘At least,’ she said, as her courage revived, ‘you must go to Chester to-morrow and learn whether there is any hope, or whether there is anything that can be done to save him.’

I promised I would go with Jack and attend the inquest, though I was hopeless of doing any good. In truth, I felt miserably helpless, seeing what a poor hand I was at keeping a secret, and how much unnecessary pain I had inflicted on poor Kitty through my incapacity to make a vigorous resistance and silence her inquiries, and what mischief might arise from admitting even his daughter to the secret of Yorke’s crime. This last consideration impelled me to give her a word of caution.

‘My dear,’ said I, ‘it is clear to me that

I have told you much more than your claim to information justified, and that I have made matters worse than I found them. I must warn you against falling into the same error. For your father's sake you must not repeat a word I have told you to any living being.'

'Is it likely that I should betray my own father?' she asked indignantly.

'Not willingly, I am sure. But it struck me that, with the best intentions in the world, you might confide in Jack, believing that he could avert a catastrophe.'

'Jack!' she exclaimed, with a start, as if under the shock of a new revelation. For a moment she looked at me in wild consternation; then in a tremulous voice, that scarcely rose above a whisper, she said, 'Tell Jack!' and, dropping her face in her hands, burst once more into tears, murmuring between the rising sobs, 'Never, never!'

She would not be comforted. Rising with a despairing shake of her head, she left me and went up to her room to grieve in solitude.

I was up betimes the next morning, and having given half an hour to the time-table, I went upstairs and tapped at Kitty's door.

‘Shall I send you up a cup of tea, my dear?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she replied. ‘I am getting up; I shall be down soon.’

‘Don’t hurry on my account, dear. I can have breakfast by myself.’ Then I added after a pause: ‘I find there’s a train from Chester brings me in at 6.37, so I shall be home in time to take you to the theatre.’

‘If there is anything pressing you will telegraph, won’t you?’

‘Of course, my dear.’ I paused again, then said: ‘When Jack comes I’ll tell him you have a headache—shall I?’

‘No ; I will see him before you go,’ she answered gravely.

Knowing she must have had a bad night, and still be suffering from mental agitation, it seemed to me advisable that she should avoid meeting him just now. In her place I should have been glad to get out of an embarrassing position on any pretext. Not she. Her pluck and spirit rose in proportion to the difficulties and peril of the situation. That was evident in her meeting with Jack. Her composure and self-command astonished me. She spoke of my going with him to attend the inquest as if it were merely to gratify our curiosity. Nothing in her manner could have revealed to the most keen observer that she entertained the terrible dread of that inquest throwing suspicion of murder upon her father. There was no fear of her betraying his secret. To save him she could cheat even the man she loved.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE INQUEST AND ATTENDANT EVENTS.

WHEN we arrived at Chester, Jack, after exacting a promise that I would meet him at the Albion at half-past twelve and take lunch with him, went off to St. Botolph's—where he expected to meet Mr. Cunningham, his grandfather's solicitor—and I strolled down through the town. I found portraits of the late Vicar exhibited in the windows of all the fancy shops. It was a strikingly handsome face, a little like Jack's in certain features, but harder and more ascetic in expression. Outside the news-vendors', showbills of local newspapers

announced in big type 'The late Vicar of St. Botolph's. Discovery of the body. Supposed murder. Latest particulars.' It surprised me to note how few people stopped to look at the portraits or read the announcements, which had such awful significance for me.

At half-past twelve I went to the hotel. Jack was reading a newspaper in the smoke-room. He had failed to find Mr. Cunningham, but just as we were sitting down to lunch in the dining-room the solicitor bustled in, with apologies for not keeping the appointment, and for intruding upon us now.

'Will you join us?' said Jack; 'we may discuss business and a chop at the same time.'

'With the greatest pleasure; that is, if—er——' He dropped his voice so that I lost what followed.

'Oh, perfectly,' replied Jack, and, turning

to me, he introduced us: 'My friend, Mr. Holderness—Mr. Cunningham.'

The lawyer smiled, shook hands with me, and said a word or two about the weather, as he deposited his black bag on a side table, and removed his gloves, while Jack ordered another cover for our table.

'Well, Mr. Sherridan,' said the solicitor, passing a silk handkerchief over his bald head, with a touch at his closely trimmed iron-gray whiskers, 'I have very little to report. We have made an exhaustive search—at it until two o'clock this morning—and have found no trace whatever of the sandal-wood box or its contents. Every cupboard and drawer has been turned out; I personally have examined all documents and papers, and therefore I am in a position to affirm that the notes are not in the Vicarage now,' he added, impressively laying the tips of his fingers on the edge of the

table and leaning forward—‘nor the will, either.’

Jack, seemingly quite unconcerned by the latter particular, said, as he filled his guest’s glass :

‘I suppose there’s no question about my grandfather having drawn the money?’

‘We shall have the evidence of the banker at the inquest. There is no reason to doubt that he did draw five hundred pounds from the bank on the Saturday before his disappearance.’

‘It is not likely that he paid it away in the interim?’

‘We shall have evidence on that point also,’ said the solicitor, with a deep creasing of his brows, ‘and very strong evidence, I should say, judging from the attitude of the witness when I ventured to question him on the subject this morning. The money was drawn to furnish a loan to Admiral Strong, which he denies in a most emphatic

manner having received. There is certainly no receipt for the money among your grandfather's papers : while, on the other hand, there is a letter from the Admiral asking him to hold the money until he returned from Ireland.'

'That seems conclusive,' observed Jack.

'The Admiral, I may remark, is heavily in debt to the estate in consequence of previous loans. A most extraordinary friendship existed between Mr. Sherridan and the Admiral. I say extraordinary advisedly, for it would be difficult to find two men whose characteristics were more entirely at variance. The Vicar's life was devoted to the saving of men's souls ; the Admiral's sole object seems to be the destruction of their bodies. He is the inventor of a quick-firing gun, and on this invention he has squandered his own fortune and a certain portion of your grandfather's also. The difference in the temperament of

the two friends was scarcely less remarkable than the opposition of their vocations ; one was frugal in his habits, sensitive, delicate, and refined in his manner, whereas the other is apparently recklessly extravagant in his tastes, offensively rude, and a perfect bear in his behaviour.'

I smiled and nodded at the solicitor, who seemed to me a man of great penetration. He expressed precisely what I thought about the Admiral.

'It is astounding,' I said.

'I don't know,' said Jack, smiling. 'I think Robinson Crusoe would have gone mad on that island with any other companion than Man Friday. Assuredly there's more to be got out of a friend whose views are entirely opposed to your own than can be hoped for from one who points out nothing which you have not already seen, and only tells you that which you might as easily have told him.'

‘Your reasoning is very good, sir,’ said Mr. Cunningham respectfully, Jack being his host and a client as well. ‘But that is not the only explanation. Mr. Sherridan undoubtedly entertained a very deep affection for Miss Helen Strong, the Admiral’s daughter. Had she been fatherless he might have adopted her as his daughter—under the precluding conditions I am strongly disposed to believe that he intended making her his wife, or at least making her an offer of marriage.’

‘Why, that is more astonishing than his friendship for the Admiral,’ I ventured to observe. ‘Miss Strong cannot be over six-and-twenty, I should say.’

‘And my grandfather was seventy-three,’ said Jack. ‘Nevertheless marriages of this kind are published often enough in the *Times*. It supports my theory.’

‘Exactly, sir,’ said Mr. Cunningham, and he added, with a significant glance at me :

‘ I shall have something more to say on that subject.’

‘ You can speak without reserve ; I have no secrets from Mr. Holderness.’

‘ Well, Mr. Sherridan, as it bears on the subject of discussion before us, I may tell you now that your grandfather, under the irritation of your refusal to abandon the dramatic profession, wrote to me for the will he had placed in my hands some time before, with the purpose of destroying it. By that will he divided his estate between you and Miss Strong. A few days afterwards he sent me the draft of a will which he proposed to substitute for the previous one. By the second will he left all his estate to Miss Strong. As he asked my friendly opinion of this will, I returned it to him telling him what I thought, namely, that it was unjust to you, and that I believed he would on calmer reflection see the advisability of letting the previous will stand

until he was fully assured that you had forfeited all claim to his generous consideration.'

'Thank you very much,' said Jack warmly.

'Well, sir, you see,' said the lawyer, with a little flush of colour under Jack's grateful recognition of the friendly service, 'I knew nothing about you, but I do know something about the Rev. Mr. Crawley Shepherd, and knowing the kind of influence he would bring to bear on your grandfather, I concluded that you—er——'

'That I am not so black as he painted me.'

'Just so. Mr. Shepherd is one of those narrow-minded persons who think to advance themselves by pulling others back. I have had proof of that in certain attempts he has made to create ill-feeling between Mr. Sherridan and Admiral Strong, and also to shake Mr. Sherridan's confidence

in me. Possibly he thought that by completely isolating your grandfather his own chance of inheriting a fortune would be greater.'

'Was my grandfather ignorant of his curate's views?'

'No, he was not. It was he who discovered them and made them known to me. He spoke of his toadying secretary and curate with cynical contempt, and when I suggested, in drawing up the first will, that he should leave Mr. Shepherd a small legacy, he replied: "Not a penny. The rascal has feathered his nest at my expense already."'

'I cannot understand how the Vicar could employ a man whom he distrusted to that degree,' said I.

'I own it puzzled me,' said the lawyer; 'but perhaps Mr. Sherridan may account for his grandfather's choice of servants by the same psychological theory which explains his choice of a friend.'

‘Who knows the secret springs of another man’s actions?’ asked Jack, with a shrug. ‘We hardly know our own. Did I understand you, Mr. Cunningham, that the first will was sent to my grandfather?’

‘Yes; I sent it to him in a registered envelope about a week before the date of his disappearance. The draft of the new will came to me two days after, and I returned it on the Friday of that week. He may have kept both the will and the draft for further consideration, or he may have destroyed one and kept the other—*which* it is impossible to tell, for neither is to be found. Unless he destroyed both, your grandfather’s last will was probably stolen with the notes and papers contained in the sandal-wood box. There seems to me not the remotest chance of the will being found; and I need not tell you, Mr. Sherridan, that, such being the case, you inherit the whole of your grandfather’s

estate — some thirty or forty thousand pounds.'

The prospect of Jack's inheriting a fortune of this amount took away my breath, but he continued to eat and drink as if such a windfall came to him quite as a matter of course.

'Have you any notion how the thing was done?' he asked.

'Oh, I think there cannot be two opinions on that point. A couple of rascals—there must have been two—tramping to the town in the night before the races, get into the garden with some more or less felonious intention, and see through an open window a studious old gentleman sitting alone in a well-furnished library: one goes behind his chair and quietly strangles him. The shock of such an attack would be enough to kill an old man affected with heart-disease. What is to be done with his body? It occurs to them that they passed a well in

coming through a yard. They carry him and drop him down the well. They return to the house and look about the room. The desk would be the first thing a thief would turn to. In that they find a box with a thick packet of bank-notes and other papers in it. The prize is sufficient to satisfy their cupidity; they take the box, lock up the desk, remove the key, and leave the rest as they find it.'

'I suppose that's how it came about, but,' Jack said with a demurring pause, 'they were no ordinary pilfering marauders who did this thing. The common brutal murderer would never have had the self-restraint to leave that watch on the table. That seems to me a stroke of genius. It completely averts suspicion of robbery. Throwing the Vicar's light overcoat down the well is another evidence of foresight and calculation, which points rather to a premeditated crime by a man of consider-

able intelligence. What do you think, Holderness ?

‘ But if there were two ?’ I remonstrated feebly, completely upset by the evidence which already seemed to single out Kitty’s father as the culprit.

‘ It’s not so clear to me that there were two,’ said Jack, with the calm reasoning of his confounded philosophy. ‘ It requires no great force to garotte an old man of seventy ; and a man of ordinary physical strength could carry the spare body over his shoulder from the house to the yard.’

‘ If you had stuck to the Bar, Mr. Sheridan, you would have made yourself famous. Your conclusions are perfectly just,’ said Mr. Cunningham. ‘ I agree that the crime may have been committed by one man and not two, and that he was not an ordinary pilferer ; but you must allow that amongst the sharpers and rascals that attend race-meetings there are many with a misapplied

intelligence of a very high order. However,' he added, raising his glass, 'we may be certain of one thing : that intelligent criminal has destroyed the sandal-wood box and all it contained except the notes.'

Had he known what I knew his conviction would have been strengthened ten-fold.

Bob Yorke, who had committed the crime to secure the marriage of his daughter, was not likely to leave in existence a will depriving her husband of thirty thousand pounds.

We walked up the hill to St. Botolph's, and went into the vestry-room, in which the inquest was to be held. Mr. Cunningham and Jack passed into the part reserved for the jury and witnesses, and I looked about for a seat at the other end of the room, which was open to the public. It was already closely filled with persons who had come from curiosity to watch the proceed-

ings ; but as I cast my eye round for a vacant place I caught sight of one who came there for a stronger motive, and my legs shook under me with terror as I saw him. Kitty's father was there at the back, leaning against the wall, with the bundle under his arm which contained that sandalwood box which might bring him to the gallows.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ADMIRAL STIRS ME UP.

WHAT spirit of bravado or love of danger had brought Yorke into the court where inquiry was being made into the crime he had committed, with the very proof of his guilt in his hands? I know that a desire for fame, self-aggrandizement, notoriety, will tempt men into expeditions which present no allurements save the peril of death; but in this case I saw no excusable ambition, nothing but reckless foolhardiness or insanity.

I scanned the faces in the room with a fearful apprehension of finding some keen

eye upon him. Among the witnesses whose evidence was yet to be given there might be one—a servant, a neighbour, a wayfarer—who had seen him in the neighbourhood, or even in the Vicarage grounds, on the morning of the murder, and who, now recognising him, might spring up, and, pointing him out, cry, ‘That is the man!’

I felt that I must implore him, for Kitty’s sake, to withdraw while he was yet unnoticed; but he was too far removed from me, and the intervening throng too closely packed for me to approach him without causing observation and attracting attention; and as I dare not encounter this risk I stood still, quaking with fear, and thinking of poor Kitty with sickening anxiety. In this state of mind I was incapable of following the proceedings closely, or fixing the incidents distinctly in my mind. I know that the coroner and jury left the hall to view the body, and when they came back a

number of witnesses were examined. I think it was the doctor who first gave evidence. The body, he said, was too far decomposed to permit of any certain conclusion as to the cause of death. There was a distinct abrasion of the skin upon the throat, which might have been produced either by a cord employed in strangulation, or by the chain over the well being attached after death, to lower the body into the well.

After the doctor a number of witnesses were called: the Rev. Mr. Shepherd, Admiral Strong, police, servants, and others whose names and faces were unknown to me, and as each of the latter took oath a fresh tremor ran through me, and my eyes involuntarily turned towards Kitty's father, to see if his countenance betrayed any feeling of apprehension. He stood there against the wall in full view of the court, the bundle under his arm, and not a muscle of his face moved. Ah ! I would have given

something to have had his phlegm. But happily all these witnesses told nothing that was not already known ; no one had seen a trespasser in the Vicarage grounds, either before or after the event.

Then the coroner, addressing the jury, summed up the evidence and pointed out that their duty was to decide according to their belief by what means the deceased had come to his end ; and this duty was speedily discharged, for, it being impossible to believe that the Vicar had fallen into the well by accident, or committed suicide, the only conclusion left them was that he had been murdered by some person or persons unknown.

When the verdict had been given there was a general hum of voices as the public rose and moved towards the door, and in this movement I lost sight of Kitty's father ; and though I got out as quickly as possible, and waited at the door until the

last of the crowd came out, I saw him no more. His sudden disappearance seemed quite in keeping with his mysterious character.

Jack, quitting the hall by the door at the other end of the building reserved for the court, came to me and said :

‘I’m afraid you will have to return to Birmingham without me, Holderness. There’s a lot to be done yet. I may have to stay here for two or three days, and go to London after. Kitty will know that I shall join you again as soon as it is possible.’

We shook hands and parted. I was not displeased to have a few hours to myself, for I had to settle what I should say to Kitty on my return, and construct some fiction which should set the poor girl’s mind at rest, and this was a task of no little difficulty for a man whose inventive faculty is not remarkable for fertility. And happily, by

dint of downright perseverance, I managed, by the time I reached Birmingham, to concoct a theory in support of her father's innocence, which appeared so plausible that I almost cheated myself into the belief that it was a true explanation.

‘Well, my dear,’ said I, with the most cheerful tone I could assume, when Kitty opened the door to me, ‘the inquest was all over by four o’clock, and the jury have returned a verdict of murder against some person or persons unknown.’

This news did not seem to cheer her much, and the expression of pain and anxiety in her beautiful dark eyes remaining unchanged, I hastened to add, as I closed the parlour door :

‘But it’s the luckiest thing in the world I went there, for it knocks on the head any doubt we may have had about your father’s complicity in the crime.’

These words also were too equivocal, ap-

parently, to be quite reassuring. She knitted her brows as if trying to see where the advantage came in, still looking into my eyes with strained eagerness.

‘First of all,’ I continued, ‘I had lunch with Mr. Cunningham—an unusually keen lawyer; and he laid it down, as beyond doubt, that the crime was committed by two rascals (and not one) tramping to Chester for the races, and this seemed to be the opinion of the coroner, judging from his remarks.’

‘There was a man with my father on the racecourse on Monday—a horrible-looking fellow,’ Kitty observed.

‘That’s nothing to do with it, my dear,’ said I a little testily. ‘What convinces me that your father had no hand in the crime is that he was there in the court to-day.’

‘He there to-day!’ she exclaimed.

‘Yes,’ said I triumphantly; ‘and he made no attempt to conceal himself. He stood there against the wall, where all the court

could see him. Now, would he have dared to do that if he had been guilty? Would he have been mad enough to court discovery by some of those witnesses who might have seen the murderer in the grounds on Monday night?

‘It seems impossible!’ she cried, clasping her hands as if in gratitude to heaven.

‘And, what’s more, he had the bundle under his arm in which he put the sandal-wood box yesterday morning.’

‘But why was he there?’ she asked, hope now twinkling in her eyes, moistened with a tear of joy.

‘I’m coming to that directly. Don’t hurry me. If we find that our suspicions were unjust, the least we can do in the way of reparation is to believe the story your father told us. He said that the money was what he had put by for you and drawn from the bank, and that the box had fallen into his hands by a curious accident. What

accident it was he did not tell us, but isn't it reasonable to suppose that some chance acquaintance among the vagabond crew inside the racecourse offered it to him for a trifle, and that he, recognising the artistic value of it, bought it on the spot?

‘To be sure, dear!’ faltered Kitty, the tears gathering afresh in her eyes with this happy discovery.

‘And don't you see the villainy of the man who sold him the box, who knew that suspicion must fall upon a man of doubtful character found with the box in his possession?’

‘Why, certainly! Have not *we* been led away by that fact, *we* who should have put the most generous construction upon it?’

‘Of course!’ replied I, thumping the table. To tell the truth, I was scarcely less excited and carried away than Kitty—moved by my own fiction like the actor who sheds real tears in a part of his own creation. ‘And now we come to the reason of

his being at the inquest. He went there on the chance of finding, among the witnesses summoned to attend, the villain who had sold him the box, prepared, you may be sure, if he recognised the man, to step forward and say, 'That rascal sold me this box !'

This argument seemed less conclusive to Kitty's mind.

'Did he give up the box ?' she asked.

'No, my dear ; that would certainly have got him into trouble. How could he prove that it had been sold to him ? Remember, his past life would not bear scrutiny—and, again, inquiry into his life would have involved the revelation of all he most earnestly wishes to keep secret. It might even upset your marriage with Jack, which your father has the greatest desire in the world to see concluded.' I was a fool to say that ; I wished the words unsaid the moment they were out of my lips, for I saw

a shadow fall on Kitty's face at once. She sat down quietly with trouble in her eyes, and sat silently twining and untwining her fingers, her head bowed over her lap.

‘The great thing is,’ said I, ‘that we can think well of your father now.’

‘Yes, that is the great thing,’ she acquiesced, raising her head.

‘I shouldn't have seen him in the court to-day if he had been guilty—that's certain. And another thing,’ said I, a new light breaking in on me, ‘it isn't likely that if he had taken the box he would have been fool enough to give it to you. That is certain.’

‘Yes, that is certain,’ she agreed. ‘Thank God we have not that trouble to bear!’

She spoke with a certain want of elasticity, as if all the trouble were not removed from her heart; but she said not a word to me of the grief that remained. Nor did

she allow herself to brood over this secret trouble long, for after a few minutes of silent reflection she sprang up and busied herself in preparing tea for me—the hour drawing near when we must start off for the theatre.

‘I don’t think we shall see Jack for some days,’ said I, as she bustled about. ‘There is a great deal of business to be done in winding up his grandfather’s affairs.’

‘And, then, he has friends to see,’ she said, without showing surprise at the announcement. ‘He has neglected them so long to be with us.’

‘Ay, and he is likely to have more friends than ever now, for it seems he will inherit all his grandfather’s estate—thirty thousand pounds! Think of that. Why, you will keep your carriage.’

She turned to fill the teapot without replying.

‘Did you speak to my father?’ she asked presently.

‘No : he was gone before I could reach the door of the vestry-room.’

‘When you do see him, will you tell him that I know all, and want to see him very much?’

I told her that I did not see how I could do that, as I had promised that I would not reveal his existence to her. ‘You must remember, dear,’ said I, ‘that you forced me unwillingly to confess what I knew.’

She sighed. That was all. We had no time for further discussion then, and when we came from the theatre at night she was so tired and exhausted by the mental strain of the day that she scarcely opened her lips, and went to bed leaving her supper almost untasted.

For my own part, I felt wonderfully relieved, for the more I thought about the crime at the Vicarage the more convinced I became that the theory which I had invented with no other object than to allay

Kitty's fear was actually the true explanation of her father's connection with it. Welsher, cardsharper, adventurer—Yorke might be any of these so long as he was innocent of the crime, of murder and robbery.

Kitty received letters from Jack—one a day, I should say ; but I only saw the outside of them. As soon as Kitty, ever looking out for the postman, possessed herself of one, she rushed up to her room to read it there without interruption. But she gave me scraps of news from them—Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday he wrote from Chester ; but on Saturday he was in London. Many new names were mentioned, showing, as we expected, that friends were rallying round him now that he was in the stream of good fortune.

‘Ha, ha!’ said I ; ‘the more friends the better. They are a sign of good times coming, like the swallows in spring. But he

doesn't forget us, Kitty. Jack's heart is true.'

We both did our best to be cheerful, but it called for an effort on both sides. For, independent of other considerations, the absence of Jack, whose cheerful presence, kindly attentions, and vivacious conversation had brightened our lives constantly during the past weeks, made the days seem uncommonly long and dreary. Nothing worthy of note occurred during the rest of the week, and on the Monday following we were at Stafford. The advance agent had secured us a respectable-looking lodging in Cavendish Street, and we played 'The Blue-stocking' to a fairly good house on Monday night. Tuesday morning, Kitty having made my favourite dish—a beef-steak pudding—we went out for a walk round the town, which was less enjoyable than it might have been, because we learnt it was salting day at one of the big potteries, and

the acrid fumes that blew down and filled the streets were enough to choke a stranger to the place. A little before one we returned to Cavendish Street, where, on opening the door, our landlady told us a gentleman was waiting to see us. With the joyful belief that Jack had run down to take us by surprise, I opened the sitting-room door, and there found to our surprise and disgust that our visitor was Admiral Strong. He was sitting by the open window that looked on to the courtyard at the back of the house, inhaling the brown smoke that poured down from an adjacent kiln with evident satisfaction ; indeed, he told us that he considered the atmosphere only second to the air of the fighting deck of an old liner after a grand salute. His appearance was not improved by the mourning suit he now wore, which made him look shorter, stouter in the lower parts, and redder in the face than ever. But I was forced to admire

the shining white curls that clustered over his head, and I was not less delighted to observe that his manners were far more agreeable than I had found them at our previous meeting: but this change, I discovered later, was entirely due to the presence of Kitty, whom he addressed in a tone of courteous deference, tempered with a curious mingling of old-fashioned gallantry and fatherly gentleness.

‘My dear young lady,’ said he, ‘I have seen you play on the stage, and need scarcely apologize for taking the first opportunity of improving my acquaintance with you. Where there is honey there will flies arise; and though, to be sure, there may be buzzing around you some far handsomer and more attractive than I, I’ll answer for it you shall find none with a more sincere admiration for your sweet, charming person and elegant accomplishments. I’ve one daughter who is the joy of my life; but if

I'd the pick of the world I'd not pass you in choice of a second.'

With much amusement twinkling in her eye, Kitty made him a graceful little curtsey in acknowledgment of these compliments, and then, her mirth provoked by the oddness of the situation, for as yet I had not opened my lips to introduce him, overflowing in a little ripple of laughter, she said, with an apt echo of his old-world style :

'Indeed, sir, there's only one thing more you can tell me to add to my obligation, and that is the name and quality of the gentleman I have the honour to address.'

'Why, surely your uncle has given you some description of one Admiral Strong.'

'Certainly he has,' said the artful puss, who, I feel sure, had recognised him at the first glance. 'But you must excuse me if I failed to recognise the original from the portrait.'

'That's no fault of yours, I'll warrant, my

dear, though the likeness wasn't lost by flattery, I'll answer for it. You didn't spare your colours neither, did you, sir?" continued he, turning to me: "and you find it easier to let your tongue go behind a man's back than before his face, don't you? Well, well," he added, turning to Kitty, with a more amiable expression, "we all have our shortcomings, and if your uncle can't see any difference between an honest old man and a bucket of tar he's more to be pitied than blamed."

"Pray, sir," said I, nettled by this treatment, "will you tell me the object of the call with which you have honoured us?"

"Well, you may take it I have not called for the pleasure of seeing you," he replied, and, turning again to Kitty, continued: "The fact is, I saw by the papers that you were playing in Stafford, and having got your address from the box-office of the theatre, I came here expecting to find

Mr. Jack Sherridan, who left Chester on Saturday.'

'Mr. Sherridan is in London.'

'In London! I'm sorry to hear it, though you leave me no reason to repent my journey, Miss Yorke. I shall have to tell him my mind in a letter, though it's a style of communication as little to my taste as giving orders in French with breakers ahead and a gale astern. I wanted to have it out with him, and speak my mind face to face.'

His attitude was so combative, his expression so menacing, that Kitty's face grew grave with apprehension.

'He sent his solicitor to me, and I wager you can't guess what for, my dear.'

Kitty shook her head in silent anxiety.

'Then I'll tell you. This solicitor, you must understand, was one of your mealy-mouthed sort. Now, I'm not.'

As he looked at me I nodded acquiescence.

‘I’m a man of practical common-sense. There’s not a particle of sentiment in my nature—none of your fine feelings or nonsense of any sort.’

As he still had his eye fixed on me, I again nodded to express my complete agreement with this statement.

‘Well, the lawyer begins in this style. “Sir,” says he, “my client, Mr. John Sherridan, having heard that it was his grandfather’s intention to advance you the sum of five hundred pounds, has sent me to inquire if you have any present necessity for the loan.” Naturally, you know, I asked what the deuce it mattered to Mr. Jack Sherridan or anyone else what my necessities were, to which the lawyer replied that although his client was the last man in the world to busy himself with another gentleman’s private affairs, or occupy himself with a business that did not concern him, he nevertheless felt in this case he might

venture to let me know that if I had need of money I was at liberty to draw upon him for the amount required. Then he added this astounding piece of information, that in the absence of a will it was Mr. Jack Sherri-dan's intention to dispose of his grandfather's estate in accordance with the purpose which, he believed, my old friend would have carried out had he lived—in short, that as soon as the affairs were wound up he should make over half of his inheritance to me ! There now, what do you think of that ?

‘What ?’ I exclaimed, ‘he hands you over fifteen thousand pounds of his fortune ?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Admiral ; ‘and with less reluctance than you might hand over fifteen pence to satisfy a conscientious scruple. Ah !’ he added, turning to Kitty, whose face was radiant with joy and pride, ‘you are delighted ! You’d rather have a generous lover than all the money in the world, eh ?’

He took her hand and shook it warmly.

Just at that moment our landlady entered the room with the tray of dinner-things.

‘Presently,’ I said to her, with a sign to leave the room and take the tray with her.

‘No, lay your cloth, my good woman,’ said the Admiral, and, turning to me, he added: ‘If that was a hint for me to cut my visit short, you’ve wasted your ingenuity, for I shan’t take the hint.’

‘As we have nothing but a beefsteak pudding——’ I began apologetically.

‘A beefsteak padding! why, that’s the best dish in the world.’

‘Well,’ said I, ‘I can answer for it; no pudding could be better than Kitty makes.’

‘Ay, I’m sure of that; but if there were nothing but a crust of bread I’d stay to share it, for the sake of the company; and if you would make me quite at my ease, Miss Kitty, do remove your bonnet.’

Kitty left us to go to her room, and the Admiral, squaring his chair to face me, said :

‘ Now, Mr. Fiddlesticks, let us understand each other. It seems to me, damme ! for all your cursed carefulness, that you’re not best pleased with this division of property.’

‘ I must admit it took me by surprise,’ said I.

‘ Oh, it surprised you to find that Jack Sherridan’s too honest to take advantage of an accident and stick to an estate that his grandfather intended to divide, eh ? Why ?’

‘ Why ?’ I replied warmly, goaded beyond endurance by his sarcasms and aggressive manner, ‘ why ? Because, from what the lawyer told me, you’ve drained the estate pretty freely already with loans on account of your precious sharp-shooting gun, which is likely never to return a farthing of the

hundreds you've squandered on it : and because Jack has a legal and moral right to the fortune, and you have none.'

'Spoken like a man, begad !' cried the Admiral in delight, seizing my hand and nearly smashing it in a hearty grip. 'You've got a bit of spirit in you, after all. It only wants rousing up, and, damme ! if you'll only come and stay a week or two with me, I'll lay my life we shall be the best friends in the world after a dozen or two of bouts like this. You're in the right, too. I haven't any claim to the estate. As to my debts, they'll have to be wiped out, for I'm a ruined man, and it's no good flogging a dead horse ; but as to taking half that estate, that's a ship of another build, and I'll see Mr. Jack damned before I take a penny of his money. And that's what I came here to tell him.'

And this is the man, thought I, who boasts of having no fine feelings.

CHAPTER XVI.

KITTY FIGHTS A HARD FIGHT, AND CONQUERS.

THE Admiral said no more on this subject during the dinner ; indeed, he seemed unable to think of anything but the beefsteak pudding he was eating—which, he protested, was the most delicious dish he had tasted since he was a boy in the thirties—and the decadence of the times, which substituted indigestible, Frenchified messes for wholesome English cookery, and bad musicians for good housewives, to the end that it was now as difficult to get a dish fit to eat or find a lass who at a pinch could manage a household as it was to pick out a single captain in

the navy who could sail his iron ship into port if the boilers of his pestilential engines sprang a leak. But before leaving he referred again to the ruin of his fortunes, and furnished me—and doubtless Kitty also—with food for secret rumination when he was gone.

‘I knew what I had to expect last Tuesday,’ said he; ‘but I’m not the sort of man to go down to the bottom with my hands in my pockets. As soon as the inquest was over I tackled the newspaper reporters, and told ’em it was my intention to give a thousand pounds for the lost will, and I begged them to insert an advertisement to that effect in all the papers they supplied with a report of the case. For, you see, I argued it this way: If the man who did this murder is the scheming, cold-blooded, calculating rascal he seems to be by the evidence given to-day, he’s not likely to destroy anything that may bring him in money; and if he

could murder a man for five hundred pounds, it stands to reason he'd give up the will for a thousand. What is more, wherever the criminal may have hid himself, he'd find means to get a paper reporting the inquest, to know how the verdict went, and there he'd find this offer of a reward. I made sure I should get a letter from the scoundrel, but here's a week gone, and though the reporters put in a paragraph as I asked 'em, and I've had that advertisement in half a dozen papers every day, I haven't received a single line respecting it from anyone.'

'There is still hope,' said I.

'Ay,' he replied, 'but hope won't save a man from sinking,' adding in my ear, 'As you know well enough, Mr. Cheerful, and be d——d to you !'

The Admiral's conclusion seemed to me perfectly just, and the fact that no response had been made to his announcement pointed

unmistakably to the fact that Kitty's father had the will. Kitty's silence and the wistful, pensive, and sad expression in her face showed me but too clearly that she shared my renewed suspicions. We could only hope that the Admiral's advertisement might yet be answered—how sincerely, he himself little imagined.

Jack came to Stafford the same evening. In the middle of the third act I saw him standing in the wings taking off his gloves and regarding Kitty, who was then on the stage. At that distance I could see the happy glow of love and admiration in his face. When I went up from the orchestra after the fall of the curtain, I found them standing together by the back cloth. Seeing me, Kitty drew her hand from his, and ran to the dressing-room. There was trouble and perplexity in Jack's face as he turned to meet me. The first words he spoke were :

‘What is the matter, Holderness?’

‘Nothing,’ I answered, stammering, perhaps, with a quick presentiment of evil.

‘Be candid with me, for God’s sake!’ he said piteously.

‘Upon my word I don’t understand what you mean, Jack,’ I replied.

‘Kitty’s changed. She’s not the same. Have I said anything in my letters to hurt her? Does she feel that I have neglected her?’

‘Not a bit; she’s too sensible for that. We knew you would come as soon as you could get away; and as for your letters, if you had seen her seize the one that came this morning, you——’

‘Perhaps I ought to have told her that I might be able to run down to-night.’

‘No, no; I’m sure she cannot be so foolish as to have taken umbrage at a trifle. You know how reasonable and generous she is in judgment. She may be a little bit

upset, though, for we've had a visitor to-day ;' and then I told him of the Admiral's visit to us. But he could find nothing in that to account for the marked change in her manner.

' Yet it must be so,' he said. ' Perhaps I expected too much.' Then, as Kitty appeared in the distance, he added : ' Not a word of this to her.'

She joined us with a light step and a smile, but I could see that her gaiety was forced, and there was constraint in her manner as she took Jack's offered arm when we left the theatre. And now Jack proved himself a better actor than she, for he chatted brightly all the way home, and nothing in his behaviour betrayed his secret misgivings, whereas Kitty's mirth sounded to me almost hysterical. I have reason to believe from subsequent events that a terrible conflict between love and honour had been swaying her destiny, and that at

this time the presence of the man she loved better than all the world taxed her strength of principle to the utmost. Indeed, I think that in the end (it was just before we reached our lodgings) her strength gave way, and she abandoned herself to the guidance of her heart, for there was a sudden change in her demeanour as though she had overthrown all self-restraint; and as I closed the street-door she threw her arms round Jack's neck and laid her cheek to his, her eyes closing in an ecstasy of passion.

At table she was strangely excited : her cheek was flushed with colour ; the pupils of her eyes were so dilated that the eyes themselves seemed quite black ; she never looked more bewitching, nor talked more brilliantly. And she carried us away with her so completely that I forgot her previous constraint and reserve. Then, just after supper, another change came. At some

observation of Jack's—I did not notice what it was—she ceased to laugh. I saw her looking at Jack's averted face with an expression of shame and suffering in her eyes and on her lips, and the colour had left her cheek.

I thought that this would be a proper time to go and smoke a quiet pipe outside the house and leave them together. 'Jack will bring back her smiles,' said I to myself, as I quietly stepped out of the room, drawing the door to noiselessly after me. But before I had got the pipe out of my overcoat pocket Kitty came out to me, and said in a low tone full of entreaty, as she pressed my hand between her own moist, cold palms :

'Come back, uncle. Smoke your pipe indoors. For heaven's sake do not leave me now!'

I followed her back into the sitting-room, much disturbed in my mind by this fervent

appeal. Jack was lighting a spill at the lamp.

‘Oh, Kitty,’ said he cheerfully, ‘there’s one thing I haven’t told you. I got clear of the lawyers one afternoon and ran down to Sevenoaks to look at the most charming little snugery you can imagine—an old mill-house on a trout stream, the quaintest, prettiest, jolliest little old-world place! I should have taken it on the spot, only I thought you ought to see it first and consider whether you would like it for a summer home.’

‘A home for me!’ she exclaimed. ‘Why, we can’t stay in a lodging more than a week or so at a time.’

‘Oh, of course you can’t, now that you’re a strolling player.’

‘I think,’ she said slowly, looking down at the floor—‘I think I shall never be anything else than a strolling player.’

He turned, the lighted spill halfway to

his pipe, and after regarding her a moment in awed silence he said :

‘ But surely, dear, you will leave the stage when you marry !’

‘ I don’t know,’ she replied in a firm, low tone ; then, her voice faltering, she added : ‘ Perhaps I shall never marry.’

We looked at her, Jack and I, in mute dismay, amazement paralyzing us.

END OF VOL. I.



